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USDA unable to weed out unapproved modified foods

By Jasmin Melvin

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WASHINGTON, Jan. 14, 2009 (Reuters) — The U.S. food supply is at risk of being invaded by unapproved imports of genetically modified crops and livestock, a **USDA** internal audit report released Wednesday said.

The report, released by the U.S. Agriculture Department's Office of Inspector General, said the USDA does not have an import control policy to regulate imported GMO animals.

Its policy for GMO crops, though adequate now, could become outdated as other nations boost production of their own GMO crops, the report added.

The Office of Inspector General recommended the department develop an overall control policy for all GMO imports and implement a strategy to monitor GMO crop and livestock development in foreign nations.

The audit found that the USDA needs to develop screening measures to weed out undeclared GMO crops and livestock. The department currently has no measures in place to identify a shipment of unapproved GMO imports unknown to the U.S. regulatory system, the report said.

The **United States** has been a forerunner in developing GMO plants and animals since the 1990s, but other countries are beginning to invest more in biotechnology.

The report noted that **China** has pledged \$500 million toward biotechnology by 2010 and has developed a new form of GMO rice.

Although the implications associated with Americans consuming unapproved GMO food are unknown, the health and environmental concerns that it poses could threaten commerce.

The USDA's lack of policies and monitoring capability on the matter reflect the United States' dominance over the global market concerning genetic modification.

"Department officials stated that they have not needed such a strategy because most transgenic plants were first developed within the U.S. regulatory system, and it was unlikely that anything unfamiliar would be imported," the report said.



A security guard patrols next to a genetically modified organism (GMO) experimental area outside Zurich July 7, 2008. REUTERS/Christian Hartmann

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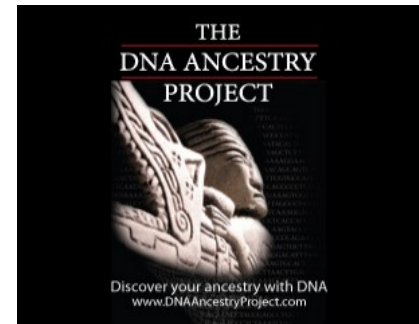
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"And transgenic animals have not been commercialized," the report also said of officials' reasoning behind being slow to develop regulations.

The USDA, for the most part, agreed with the report's recommendations.

In a letter to the Office of Inspector General, the USDA said it would create a plan for monitoring GMO plant and animal developments worldwide by November 30. But further action on policy would require approval from the incoming administration.

(Editing by Christian Wiessner)



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