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Environment

Smart chickens weren't be duped by foul play

August 02 2009 at 11:20AM

By Eleanor Momberg

Chickens refusing to eat the maize they had been fed has led to the discovery that their feed had been genetically modified to include a well-known weed and insect killer.

Strilli Oppenheimer was recently approached by Dawid Klopper, the head gardener at the family estate, Brenthurst, informing her that her indigenous African chickens were refusing to eat the mealies in the chicken feed bought from a large supplier. Concerned that the birds may be ingesting genetically modified maize, she instructed Klopper to have the maize tested.

The chickens' diet was immediately changed to include organic vegetables, Oppenheimer stopped consuming the home-grown eggs and the maize was sent to the GMO testing facility at the University of the Free State for analysis.

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The results confirmed Oppenheimer's initial suspicion - the maize had been genetically engineered to produce proteins that are toxic to certain insects and weeds.

"It contained BT1 which makes the maize insect resistant, as well as Roundup which makes it weed resistant. This is the first report we have had of chickens not eating GM feed," said a GM expert.

While small quantities of BT1 and Roundup weed killer were found in the seeds, the concern remained with the cumulative effect of GM feed, not only on the chickens, but also on the eggs they produced for the family.

"This is of serious concern. Do you know that 96 percent of soya-based foods are genetically modified and that maize in South Africa is contaminated," asked Oppenheimer, pointing out that research by well-known scientist Dr Arpad Pusztai had shown that rats fed on GM potatoes suffered from a weakened immune system and stunted growth of their internal organs, including the liver, kidneys and brain.

Pusztai was fired by the Rowett Research Institute in the UK in 1998 after his research into the human nutritional consequences of GM. His findings had far-reaching implications for the biotech industry, which had contended that GM crops and products would not adversely affect human health.

International research has shown a direct link between certain types of genetic engineering and cancer.

Gundula Azeez and Coliin Nunan of The Soil Association, a UK environmental charity, stated in their paper, "GM Crops - the health effects", that international research had shown that milk, eggs and meat from GM-fed animals contained GM crop DNA,

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concluding that it was likely that people were frequently being exposed to GM DNA.

They concluded that because of the lapses in extensive safety assessments, there were "very good scientific reasons for being concerned about the safety of GM crops".

Rose Williams, acting director of Biowatch, said globally there was great concern that GM products had not been adequately tested in terms of their effect on people, animals and the environment.

"There has been no testing on humans, very limited testing on animals and very little research on environmental impacts. This is the case globally, but in South Africa even less work has been done, even though the commercial release of GM maize, GM soya and GM cotton has been approved."

Williams said concerns by NGOs such as Biowatch, the African Centre for Biosafety and SAFeAGE about the lack of control over GM crops and contamination of non-GM crops had largely been ignored.

"Government has not done enough to protect the public from the potential threats of GM foods. There is also the matter of liability - who will take responsibility for people's losses and any health problems relating to consumption of GM foods, whether they are for people or for animals."

Williams said the contamination of non-GM crops was a real problem, with the biotech industry leading people to believe that co-existence of GM and non-GM crops was possible. "But it is not," she said.

While the recently implemented Consumer Protection Act called for the labelling of GM foods, the regulations linked to the measure had yet to be finalised.

About her chickens' refusal to eat their maize, Oppenheimer said: "They're smart."

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