Activists: Modified Corn Not So Sweet

By Monica Eng
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• Biotech company's doctored crop hits stores unlabeled

As the Midwest crunches into sweet corn season, a new type will be appearing on grocery store shelves—even though shoppers have no way to recognize it.

It's genetically modified sweet corn from the biotech giant Monsanto, engineered to resist a common herbicide and certain pests.

The arrival of the crop's first harvest has alarmed consumer groups and activists who say genetically modified foods may pose environmental and health risks. In recent months they have urged major retailers to avoid Monsanto's sweet corn, prompting Whole Foods, Trader Joe's and General Mills to pledge not to sell or use it.

But this week the world's largest retailer, Wal-Mart Stores Inc., confirmed to the Tribune that it would not restrict sales of the genetically modified corn in its stores.

"After closely looking at both sides of the debate and collaborating with a number of respected food safety experts, we see no scientifically validated safety reasons to implement restrictions on this product," said company representative Dianna Gee.

The decision disappointed opponents of genetically engineered foods and is expected to add to an ongoing debate about whether the U.S. should require that such products are tested for safety and labeled for consumers.

"A lot of people who were their customers explicitly said we don't want you to carry this product, and I think it's unfortunate that they chose not listen to that feedback," said Patty Lovera, assistant director of Food & Water Watch. The consumer group had submitted a petition to Wal-Mart with 463,000 signatures, she said.

Other retailers also received requests to avoid the product but have not responded, Lovera said. The Safeway and Kroger grocery chains did not respond to inquiries from the Tribune about the issue.

The U.S. Food and Drug Administration encourages companies to do safety studies of new genetically modified foods but does not require it. Labeling of such foods is required in the European Union, China, Russia, Australia and Japan but not in the U.S.

Those skeptical of genetically modified foods say it is impossible to know whether the products harm people's health without more long-term research and more transparency.

"How would you ever know if there are adverse health effects?" said Michael Hansen, a senior scientist at Consumers Union, the policy arm of Consumer Reports. "There has been a doubling of food allergies in this country since 1996. Is it connected to genetically engineered foods? Who knows, when you have no labeling? That is a problem."

Monsanto said its genetically modified sweet corn complies with FDA regulations and is helping reduce insecticide use in the U.S.

"Overall, sweet corn makes up less than 1 percent of total corn acreage in the United States ... yet accounts for 40 percent of all corn insecticide treatments," the company said in a statement. "Farmers who grow biotech sweet corn can reduce insecticide applications by as much as 85 percent."

The International Food Information Council, an organization partially funded by the food industry, said campaigns against genetically modified food are groundless.

"Despite the latest attempts from some groups to stigmatize an important food crop, some of which is produced through biotechnology, the fact is that there have been no documented food safety problems with foods produced using biotechnology anywhere in the world," President and CEO David Schmidt said in a statement.
Earlier this year, the American Medical Association affirmed its stance that genetically modified foods do not need to be labeled, but it said that pre-market safety testing should be mandatory.

Genetically modified ingredients, in which a gene from one species is transferred to another to bestow certain traits, are in an estimated 70 percent of all American processed food, according to the Center for Food Safety, a group that focuses on sustainable agriculture. In the U.S., about 85 percent of all corn and 91 percent of soy crops are genetically modified, the group says.

The sweet corn from Monsanto contains a gene that produces a protein called BT that is toxic to pests. Though the protein is used in organic farming as an insecticide, Hansen and other critics cite research that raises questions about whether corn containing BT can cause allergic reactions, immune system problems and gastrointestinal issues.

Hansen said he also worries about the unintended effects of "stacking" different genetic modifications into the same organism. The Monsanto corn has another added gene that makes it resistant to the company's well-known herbicide Roundup.

And although genetically modified corn has been a part of American processed foods since the mid-1990s, opponents say they worry that eating it right off the cob could pose increased risks.

"When your children are going to be eating this corn straight—not in processed products as has previously been the case—that is exactly when you need long-term feeding studies," said Andrew Kimbrell, executive director of the Center for Food Safety.

Monsanto's corn is not the first genetically modified sweet corn to hit U.S. retail stores—Syngenta's version has been available for a decade and makes up about 3 percent of the market, according to the company—but it's the most controversial.

Monsanto has become a lightning rod for health, environmental, farming and consumer activists because of its size and what critics call its aggressive tactics to control and promote its products. The company primarily produces genetically modified corn and soy crops used in processed foods, animal feeds and fuel, and its first major foray into the fresh foods market has galvanized opponents.

The new Monsanto sweet corn is being harvested now in the Midwest, Northeast, Southeast and Texas. South central Illinois grain farmer Len Corzine said he planted less than an acre of the new corn for his family this year.

"We sprayed it with Roundup early for weeds, but ... we had no insect damage and we didn't have to spray any chemicals," said Corzine, who does not plan to sell the corn commercially. "It was some of the healthiest sweet corn we've ever had and the ear size was great."

The new sweet corn crop is arriving at stores just months before a November vote in California on Proposition 37, which would require labeling of genetically modified foods in the state.

"We absolutely have the right to know if our sweet corn we are eating at our barbecue was genetically engineered in the lab," said Stacy Malkan of California's Right to Know Campaign. "This fall California voters will decide if we can here."

Kimbrell, whose organization has sued Monsanto numerous times over issues with genetically modified crops, predicts "massive consumer backlash" from Wal-Mart's decision to carry the company's sweet corn.

The product is "a completely unnecessary and risky new food," he said. "There is no shortage of sweet corn."

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