

StarLink Corn: The First GMO SNAFU

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These are some of the headlines that have appeared in newspapers across the country since Genetically Engineered Food Alert (www.gefoodalert.org) discovered a variety of genetically engineered corn that was not approved for human consumption in taco shells this past September.

The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) is charged with regulating crops that contain pesticides within them. Thirty percent of genetically engineered (GE) crops grown in the U.S. have been inserted with the Bt (*Bacillus thuringiensis*) pesticide, among them is StarLink corn.

In 1998 the EPA gave limited approval for StarLink. The Bt corn was not approved for human consumption because it contains the Cry9C gene, which has two significant characteristics of known allergens. It is not broken down by gastric juices or by heat. Because of the concerns that it could cause allergies in humans, the EPA determined that StarLink should only be used in animal feed and for industrial purposes (such as the production of ethanol) and that it should not be allowed to be consumed directly by humans. The other stipulation of the EPA's limited approval was that StarLink should have a 660 foot non-StarLink buffer zone around the crop to prevent corn destined for human consumption from contamination through cross-pollination.

With this limited approval in hand, AgrEvo (which was later purchased by Aventis) began selling its StarLink corn seed to farmers in 1998. It has become clear that many farmers were not properly informed of the EPA restrictions. StarLink was grown on a small percentage of U.S. corn acres however, it was not separated from other corn and the extent of its contamination of neighboring corn crops through cross-pollination is not known. In Iowa, where the largest acreage of StarLink corn was planted, conservative estimates are that StarLink has contaminated 50% of this year's corn harvest. The failures of Aventis to fully inform farmers of the EPA restrictions and of U.S. regulators to ensure

"Government Investigates Reports That Taco Bell Uses Genetically Modified Corn That is Only Fit for Animals."

"Unapproved Biotech Corn Turns Up in Taco Shells."

"StarLink Fiasco Wreaks Havoc in Heartland."

that its rules were being followed are having far reaching implications.

The Food and Drug Administration has issued a recall on nearly 300 food products due to StarLink contamination. Both a major milling and a manufacturing plant temporarily closed down. Farmers, grain handlers, processors and manufacturers are paying for testing for StarLink all along the food chain. It is estimated that the costs of the unapproved variety entering the food chain will be in the hundreds of millions of dollars. Distrust in the U.S. food system, resulting in the loss of export markets could have economic reverberations for many years to come. Who will ultimately pay for these damages is in question. A wide range of lawsuits appears to be eminent.

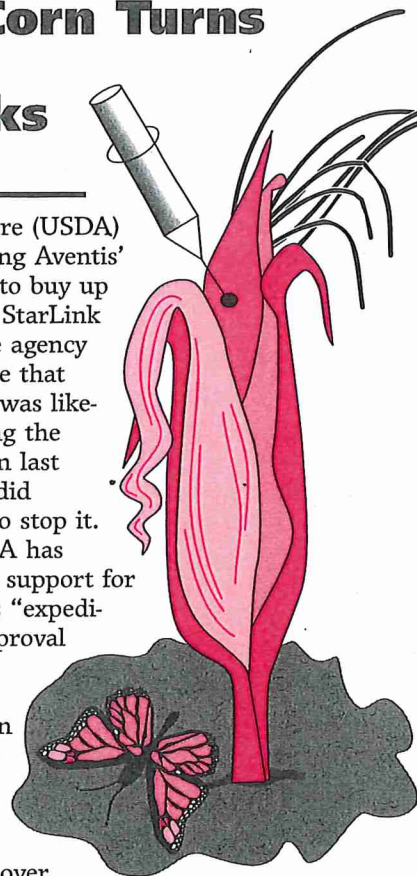
Aventis is doing all it can to advert ultimate liability. After it became public that many farmers were not properly informed about the restrictions on StarLink, Aventis attempted to have farmers retroactively sign contracts stating that the corn would not be used for human consumption and that a 660 foot buffer would be implemented. Under pressure from the EPA, Aventis canceled its registration for StarLink corn in October. However, two weeks later Aventis petitioned the EPA to obtain temporary approval of StarLink for human consumption. If the EPA takes the unprecedented decision of granting the temporary approval of StarLink for human consumption, Aventis will gain immunity from much of its responsibility for contaminating the food system. In addition, foods which contain a protein that previously has never been consumed by humans and has characteristics of an allergen will be allowed to remain in the food system.

The U.S. Department of

Agriculture (USDA) is financing Aventis' attempts to buy up the 2000 StarLink crop. The agency was aware that StarLink was likely entering the food chain last year but did nothing to stop it. The USDA has voiced its support for the EPA's "expedient" approval of StarLink for human consumption. This has raised concerns over regulatory processes. It is problematic if a government agency is siding with industry prior to the availability and evaluation of safety hazards or the full accounting of how much of a contaminant is actually in the food supply.

For years, those who have concerns about genetically modified organisms (GMOs) have been arguing that the U.S. regulatory system is severely flawed. The StarLink case exemplifies these problems. StarLink was something few of us had heard of until the Genetically Engineered Food Alert announced its findings. It is scary to think that if a public interest coalition had not taken the initiative to pursue the matter, contamination would have continued and further threatened the integrity of our food system.

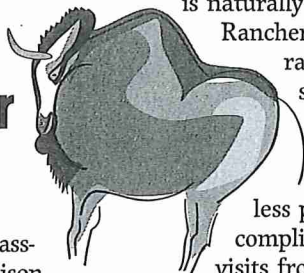
To prevent such problems in the



Meat & Seafood Depart.

By Christine Gomez

Back By Popular Demand: Bison



The expansive plains and grasslands were once home to bison, massive, quick-footed woolly beasts. Native hunting tribes traced the migratory habits of these great mammals, moving their camps to be near the herd. Native livelihood depended upon the buffalo; all parts of the animal were used for food, clothing, tools, or shelter. In exchange for these gifts, they revered the bison and never killed more than they needed.

When the Europeans came to the "New World" they marveled at the bison and hunted them for food. ("Bison" is the correct term for American Buffalo, which are not actually classified under the buffalo/bovidae family of mammals.) Bison numbers sharply declined as more Europeans settled in the West. The bison became a pawn in the hands of the Europeans as they recognized the native people's reliance on this animal for their livelihood. As the herds were hunted nearly to extinction, the plains were altered and re-organized as privately owned farmlands, complete with now familiar domesticated cattle and other livestock introduced from Europe. Fortunately, thanks to the efforts of early conservationists and ranchers, the bison was


saved and now number over 200,000 in North America.

Bison is the most complete source of protein in the market, and many believe the tastiest. It has a nice sweet flavor and is naturally low in fat and calories.


Ranchers find bison much easier to raise than cattle for several reasons: they do best when raised on native prairie grasses and are naturally acclimated to North America. They are less prone to illness and birthing complications, which mean fewer visits from the vet.

Other interesting facts: bison are the only mammal not to contract cancer. (Interestingly, plains Indians had no known cancer or heart disease.) Bison is the only non-allergenic red meat. Usually docile animals, bison can easily outrun and out maneuver most horses. They can live to be over 30 years of age and can learn the sound of their rancher's voice.

In the last few years, we at the Wedge have seen increased customer interest in bison products. Our supplier is Eichten's Hidden Acres in Center City, MN. They have a wonderful shop by the side of the highway, and you can visit the animals in person if you call ahead of time. (Our cheese department also carries the wonderful Eichten's cheeses, made from cow's milk).

We currently carry ground buffalo, sirloin tip, NY strips, summer sausage, liver sausage and jerky. For your holiday needs, we can also order custom cuts or roasts. Due to its lack of fat, bison requires a lower heat than beef, and is especially great when served medium to rare. Cooking instructions are available at our full-service meat counter. 

StarLink... continued from page 10

future, the remedies must go far beyond simply ensuring that no other GMOs are given partial approval. The StarLink debacle should spur major changes in how the regulatory system evaluates, approves and oversees usage of GMOs. Approval for each and every GMO should be dependent upon independent safety testing demonstrating no harmful effects on human health or the environment. Those that are found to be safe should be labeled to ensure the consumer's right-to-know. And finally, the biotechnology corporations that hold the patent on the GMO should be held responsible for any harm. 

The EPA is accepting public comments until November 27, 2000 on the decision for temporary approval of StarLink for human consumption. If you would like your voice to be heard, you can submit comments to the EPA by visiting <http://www.foodsafer-tynow.org>

The Minneapolis based Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy (IATP) promotes resilient family farms, rural communities and ecosystems around the world through research and education, science and technology, and advocacy. IATP has been following the issues around genetic engineering for a decade and is a member of the Genetically Engineered Food Alert that conducted the initial testing for StarLink.



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