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StarLink Dumping

By Niel Ritchie

Now let me get this straight.

The USDA knew nothing about the contamination of the US corn supply with the unapproved genetically engineered StarLink corn? Right!

If the agency didn't know about StarLink contamination, they should have. Anyone following the planting of StarLink should have known that: 1) there is no system in place to segregate corn used in animal feed from the human food supply; 2) there is no system set to monitor whether farmers were following growing instructions; 3) a certain degree of contamination through pollen drift was inevitable.

Now, the agency is doing everything it can to protect StarLink maker Aventis from liability – and is doing surprisingly little to protect farmers. The agency has asked EPA to take the unprecedented step of approving StarLink after it has contaminated the food supply. But just as questionable is the USDA's decision to approve StarLink for sale to other countries – even after other nations like Japan and the European Union are questioning the integrity of our corn and our ability to keep unapproved varieties out of the export stream.

The US food safety system, touted as the most effective and advanced in the world, was unable to prevent StarLink corn from finding its way onto grocery store shelves. This illegal product has been found in taco shells and corn chips thus far, resulting in 297 official product recalls, the temporary shutdown of some processing facilities, and before it's all said and done will cost many millions of dollars.

If the US can't effectively segregate StarLink, what makes the USDA think other countries can or want that burden.

Long before the StarLink debacle, Mexico was complaining about the US selling corn into its local markets at far below the cost of production, a practice known as dumping. Dumping disrupts markets, harms food security, and drives local producers out of business. For all of those reasons, dumping has been considered an illegal act under International Trade rules since 1948.

That doesn't seem to matter to the USDA. In a desperate attempt to rid itself of a crop that isn't wanted or needed here, they will be conducting an "End-of-Season", "Lost Our EPA Registration on StarLink", "Too-Much-Inventory", "Going Out of Business" sale (that's for our farmers), with anyone, anywhere paying rock bottom prices. Out of sight, out of mind

More economic dumping? Absolutely.

The fact that grain buyers the world over are willing to pay less than a crop is worth might be good for their cost structure, but it is bad for farmers, bad for local economies that depend on farmers, and illegal under international customary law and global trade rules. Those are the legal issues.

But what about the ethics of selling StarLink to other countries? StarLink approval in the US is being held up because of concerns that it may be allergenic in humans. Imagine the trade implications if US corn were to cause health problems overseas. Additionally, what precautions are set up to prevent StarLink contaminated products from re-entering the US through food imports?

StarLink and the other biotech crops are constantly hyped as solutions to the problems of world hunger, but the evidence so far doesn't bear that out. Instead, it points to a few transnational companies protecting their bottom line regardless of the risks to human health and farmers' exports. That might feed hungry CEOs and portfolio shareholders, but hungry people haven't seen the benefits yet.

The USDA should have known about StarLink contamination, and after the details became public it should have responded quicker. It could have stopped this third year crop in the field, paid farmers to plow it down before maturity and taken a big chunk of the surplus off the market which might have actually improved farmgate prices for the rest of the corn crop. Instead, they allowed the harvest to continue and the results are devastating.

Farmers are uncertain about where to sell and prices are so low they will likely lose money. StarLink manufacturer Aventis and their seed dealers are spending enormous amounts of time and money chasing down the crop while pointing the finger at farmers for the problem. The grain industry is liable for the contamination of the supply chains as more and more products are discovered and recalled. And now, consumers in other countries have to be concerned about whether their food system will be kept free from StarLink in the face of US efforts to dump the problem through exports.

Exactly what problem was it that biotech crops were supposed to solve?

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