Media release

Illegal imports of genetically engineered maize into the EU?

SmartStax produces six different insecticides

Munich/ Brussels 20 December 2012. Testbiotech has informed the new Commissioner Tonio Borg about its suspicions that the genetically engineered maize, SmartStax, has been imported into the EU for years without legal authorisation. It is a joint Monsanto and Dow AgroSciences product, which produces six insecticidal proteins and is tolerant to two herbicides. SmartStax was assessed by the European Food Safety Authority EFSA in 2010, but the results of the assessment were controversial and the maize was not authorised.

„SmartStax is grown in the US on millions of hectares of farmland. In the last few years, around one million tonnes of maize have been imported from the US into the EU. It is highly likely that large amounts of SmartStax were among these imports," says Christoph Then for Testbiotech. "If US maize importers cannot show that their shipments are free of SmartStax, the shipments must be stopped."

SmartStax was introduced into the US market in 2009. Since then imports of maize into the EU have been increasing. These imports are mainly used for animal feed. 800.000 tonnes of maize were imported into the EU in 2011. In 2012, the US has so far exported large quantities of its maize harvest despite a reduced yield in many regions due to a severe drought. The harvest from fields with SmartStax should be separated in the US to prevent it being exported to EU markets. However, there are no efficient controls in place since it is difficult to identify. SmartStax consists of several genetically engineered maize events, which are already authorised as single plants and can therefore be easily mistaken.

Seemingly, industry is relying upon the fact that illegal imports will escape the notice of the authorities. It is highly likely that large quantities of SmartStax have already entered the EU. This is because although the EU Commission did not authorise the plants, it equally took no measures to prevent it from being imported. There are thus sufficient grounds for suspecting that large amounts of the US maize imports violate current EU legislation.

SmartStax combines various insecticidal toxins that were originally produced only in soil bacteria. It is grown in the US because pest insects there have increasingly adapted to genetically engineered plants that produce just one single toxin. One of the six toxins in SmartStax (Cry1A105) is artificially synthesized from several bacterial proteins and does not have a true homology in nature. The EU requires that so-called stacked events produced by crossing genetically engineered plants can only be marketed if they have been authorised. They must be checked for risks arising from the interactivity of the various inserted DNA constructs in the plant cells.

SmartStax, however, was never fully investigated. For example, poultry was fed with the kernels for just 42 days to observe weight gain, and no results from feeding trials with kernels or plants to investigate health effects were forwarded to the authorities for the market application in EU. Testbiotech is demanding a new and comprehensive risk assessment of SmartStax and efficient measures to stop its import into the EU.

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Backgrounder on the maize imports: http://www.testbiotech.de/node/751

More background on risk assessment of SmartStax: http://www.testbiotech.de/en/node/517