Brazilian Agribusiness Rejects Bayer's Transgenic Rice

by Dafne Melo

First it was soy, then corn, then cotton, and now it is rice that is now in danger of being allowed to grow genetically modified (GM) here inBrazil. But judging from the public hearing held on March 18th by the CTNBio (National Technical Commission on Biosecurity), GM rice will have a much more difficult time gaining passage. Even entities tied to agribusiness (like Embrapa--Brazilian Business of Agricultural Research) which are traditionally in favor of transgenics have come out against GM rice.

Federarroz (Federation of Associations of Rice Farmers) of Rio Grande do Sul, the state responsible for 62% of the national production of rice, has also come out against licensing of GM rice, as did Farsul (Federation of Agriculture of the state of Rio Grande do Sul). "It was a first, these entities with practically the same position as the social movements like Via Campesina," said Leonardo Melgarejo, agronomist and representative of the Ministry of Agrarian Development in the CTNBio. Rafael Cruz, social scientist and coordinator for Greenpeace's campaign against genetic engineering, was also surprised with the new positioning of these entities: "In the past, Farsul defended transgenic soy as did Embrapa. Nothing is new about the arguments, but openly taking up a contrary position, even for economic reasons, is something new."

Transgenic produce already has difficulties selling in various markets, but in the case of rice, it is almost universally rejected. Only in theUnited States has GM rice been allowed to be commercialized. However, after a serious case of contamination in 2006*, US farmers have virtually rejected seeds from Bayer. According to Cruz, many countries are already preparing themselves against eventual investments from the German company. Thailand, one of the world's main producers of rice, has already put in place very strict rules, and in the Philippines a request for legalization has already been stopped in the courts.

Besides the complications of exportation, farmers have felt in their pockets what social movements and environmentalists have been saying from the beginning: growing transgenics is less costly only in the short term. In Brazil, for example, GM soy producers are already experiencing difficulties. New weeds resistant to the Monsanto herbicide (sold in conjunction with the GM seeds) are beginning to appear. Thus, besides the expensive royalties which must be paid with every harvest, the use of herbicides have not diminished and in some cases has increased, adding more costs to production.

According to Melgarejo, one representative from Bayer declared that their seeds could be used for the next ten years. After this period, they would no longer be efficient.

Besides economic concerns, GMOs (genetically modified organisms) are rejected by environmental, social and consumer groups because of the effects that they may have on human health, on the environment, and out of concern that transnationals will control natural resources and agriculture.

In the case of rice, the glufosinate ammonium present in the herbicide is extremely poisonous. The European Parliament has declared that it is cancerous, toxic, genetic-altering, and has denied its use. Tests done on rats show that ingestion of the substance caused alterations in the nervous system, allergic reactions and convulsions.

Andrea Salazar, a lawyer for Idec (Institute of Consumer Defense), who was present at the hearing, believes that the information presented by Bayer is flawed and insufficient. She stated that this is not surprising when you look at the cases of soy, corn and cotton. "The lack of and precariousness of the information presented by the companies is glaring. Their lens of evaluation is quite narrow, as much as in the area of health as in the environment," said Salazar. She went on to critique the performance of CTNBio, who in her opinion use a "precarious and irresponsible method of analysis, which puts the population more at risk, especially in the case of rice." Melgarejo added that many of the commission's advisors analyze the issue only in terms of biosecurity, and do not consider political or commercial implications. "Science is not neutral, and our choices have political and economic implications."

**In August of 2006, the US Department of Agriculture admitted that its rice production for exportation had been contaminated by Bayer's GM rice. The discovery was made only because of a routine inspection of a ship that arrived in Europe loaded with US rice. Demanding an explanation for the contamination, the Europeans pressured the US to investigate the matter. After 14 months, the findings were inconclusive. Greenpeace decided to do its own report. According to the document, the event was the "biggest commercial and financial disaster in the US rice industry." It generated global damages anywhere from US$741 million--in the best case scenario--to US$1.285 billion. Thirty countries confirmed that they received contaminated rice and closed their markets to US rice, including all of Europe. All of the contamination happened through experimental fields.*

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