

Consumer Group Sues FDA over Biotech Foods

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WASHINGTON -- A lawsuit filed Wednesday seeks to force the U.S. government to conduct mandatory reviews of genetically engineered foods and require labeling of such foods once they are approved

The Center for Food Safety's suit against the Food and Drug Administration comes after years of lobbying by environmental and consumer groups for more stringent regulation and labeling of biotech crops, which biotech opponents fear can harm human health.

"We think the FDA should be the gatekeeper and should require... a mandatory process that has rigorous science behind it and public involvement and an actual approval process," said CFS legal director Joseph Mendelson. "And we're asking that once these products are on the market that they be labeled."

The FDA had no immediate comment on the lawsuit, filed in U.S. District Court for the District of Columbia.

Genetically modified crops, such as soybeans, corn, and canola, are grown widely throughout the United States, and the world leader in development and marketing of the gene-altered crops is St. Louis, Missouri-based Monsanto Co.

Yet the United States requires no independent testing of these crops or the food products they are used in, does not mandate what data companies must submit for review, and does not require that foods that contain biotech crops be labeled, CFS said.

Indeed, the United States has been pushing Europe, through complaints with the World Trade Organization, to open its markets to genetically modified food crops, despite widespread consumer opposition there.

"There has been a conscious effort on the part of the FDA and the administration not to create any kind of regulatory burden for agricultural biotechnology," Mendelson said. "They view this purely as an issue of economics rather than of human health."

CFS and more than fifty consumer and environmental groups, filed a legal petition with the FDA in March 2000, asking the agency to adopt a more rigorous approach to biotech food regulation, but the CFS said Wednesday that the FDA had ignored the petition.

At various times over the last several years, different scientists, including some within the FDA, have warned that altering the genetic makeup of a food plant by inserting genes from one organism into another, sometimes from an animal into a plant, for instance, could trigger unexpected food allergies, create toxins in food, or spread antibiotic-resistant disease.

Last year in Australia, scientists found that genes from a bean engineered into pea plants created a potentially dangerous allergen in the biotech peas.

CFS said the tests that exposed that potential hazard have not been conducted on any of the genetically modified foods currently marketed in the United States.

The FDA is one of three government agencies that monitor genetically modified crops. The U.S. Agriculture Department's Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service oversees bio-crop trials and the Environmental Protection Agency is responsible for regulating plants engineered to produce pesticides.