

Feds sued over OK of genetically engineered alfalfa **Organic farmers, environmentalists fear contamination of their crops**

By Paul Elias
Associated Press

SAN FRANCISCO - Environmental groups and organic farmers worried about "genetic contamination" of conventionally grown crops by biotech varieties sued the federal government Thursday to try to reverse the approval of genetically engineered alfalfa.

The lawsuit alleges the federal Agriculture Department and the Environmental Protection Agency didn't adequately investigate environmental effects such as cross-pollination of the biotechnology crop with conventional alfalfa, which is used mainly to feed cows.

The USDA approved the alfalfa in June after the EPA said it had no objections.

Fear of mixing crops

Organic farmers and conventional growers are worried that genetically engineered plants will accidentally mix with their crops and scare away customers who pay premiums for organic goods and otherwise refuse to buy biotechnology crops.

"Consumers will reject organic products that are contaminated with genetically engineered material," according to the lawsuit filed in San Francisco federal court against the USDA and EPA by the Sierra Club, Center for Food Safety and five other nonprofit groups and two farmers. "For example, milk and meat from cows fed with genetically engineered alfalfa will be unattractive to the organic consumer."

The lawsuit said farmers are worried about losing alfalfa export sales of \$480 million annually in biotech-averse countries such as Japan and throughout Europe.

The lawsuit asks a judge to overturn the USDA's approval and order the agency to conduct an extensive study on the consequences the biotech crop will have on the environment.

USDA spokeswoman Karen Eggert said the agency doesn't comment on pending litigation.

Some alfalfa farmers worry that biotechnology behemoth Monsanto Co. will force them to pay technology fees if the genetically engineered crops mix with their conventionally grown crops.

Monsanto, which controls the biotech alfalfa patents, requires farmers to pay a premium to use its seed and sign contracts promising not to save seeds from year to the next.

"As a producer of organic alfalfa seed and hay, there is absolutely no way I will be able to protect my crop from contamination," said Rugby, N.D., farmer Blaine Schmaltz, who is not part of the lawsuit.

The St. Louis-based Monsanto has successfully sued farmers it caught purposely planting its genetically engineered corn, cotton and soy seeds without paying the company's technology fee.

Monsanto spokeswoman Mica DeLong said the company, which is not named in the lawsuit, had no comment.

About alfalfa

Alfalfa is the fourth most widely grown U.S. crop behind corn, soybean and wheat. Most of the nation's 115 million pounds of alfalfa seed grown each year comes from California.

Most alfalfa is turned into hay and used for animal feed, though about 7 percent of the annual crop is used for sprouts eaten by people.

The market remains for biotech alfalfa, which is genetically engineered to resist a popular weed killer.

About 1 million pounds of the biotech seed were sold last year, and about twice that is expected to be sold this year, said Mark McCaslin, who is president of Idaho biotechnology company Forage Genetics International, which codeveloped the genetically engineered alfalfa with Monsanto. McCaslin declined to comment on the lawsuit.

The USDA has approved dozens of biotechnology crops in the last 10 years, mostly related to corn, soy and cotton seeds.