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Twitter breaks open secret GM corn approval

Twitter was the key to exposing our food regulator's (FSANZ) secret approval of the chemical laden GM corn "Smartstax". FSANZ did not put the crop through a safety assessment, nor notify the public of the crop's approval.

The crop, jointly owned by Monsanto and Dow, has eight pesticide related GM genes:

- Six genes generate insecticidal toxins within the plant to kill insects, five of these in every cell of the plant, including the corn cob, and
- Two genes prevent the plant from dying from being sprayed with two different types of weed killers.

[MADGE has sought the opinion of international biosafety expert Jack Heinemann, Professor of Genetics and Molecular Biology at the University of Canterbury in New Zealand on the safety assessment of these types of stacked GM crops (see below).]

"The GM crop sent shockwaves through Twitter last year when it was approved for planting in Canada without being assessed for safety by Health Canadaⁱ" said MADGE's Madeleine Love. "We're familiar with 2 or maybe 3 gene crops, but an 8-gene unassessed crop was something else."

"I expected that FSANZ would be asked to approve the crop to provide Monsanto and Dow with a trade outlet to Australia and NZ, and to prevent the risk of Monsanto and Dow being sued by Australia or NZ for unapproved GM contamination."

"Six months later news of the large scale introduction of Smartstax seeds to US farmers flew round Twitter, and I knew it would enter our food supply soon."

"Usually FSANZ notifies the public when a new GM crop is going to be assessed for safety. While MADGE regards the assessments and review as inadequate, at least the public is notified. But I heard nothing until it dawned on me that FSANZ wasn't going to tell us and I started to investigate:

- There was nothing on the FSANZ website about Smartstax and it was not on the FSANZ list of approved crops (Table to Clause 2, Standard 1.5.2)ⁱⁱ
- I re-read the Health Canada story and found the technical names of the four GM crop lines from the Institute of Science in Society (I-SIS) websiteⁱⁱⁱ
- Then I went to the industry Agbios website and used the technical crop name (MON89034xTC1507xMON88017xDAS-59122-7) to access the approval listing. The crop was not listed as approved for food in Australia^{iv}
- I noted all of the crop's GM genes, and then went through each of the individual FSANZ approval documents to check that the genes matched those in the four crops v

"At that point I was certain about how FSANZ would've acted, and contacted them. Three days later I received a reply, saying that Smartstax was an approved crop for food in Australia. "i"

We understand that FSANZ is claiming that as the individual GM crops that make up this plant were already approved, they didn't need to reassess this four-in-one combination that triples the number of pesticide genes. FSANZ is claiming that the Standards allow them to do this. MADGE will investigate the legality of this.

MADGE sought the opinion of international biosafety expert Jack Heinemann, Professor of Genetics and Molecular Biology at the University of Canterbury in New Zealand [Bio below]^{vii}.

He replied with a three page report [available] saying:

- Plants like Smartstax are products of biotechnology
- Many expert risk assessors (including the Ad Hoc Technical Expert Group of the Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety) recommend that risk assessment should be undertaken because of potential unexpected, adverse effects to human health of GM crops bred in this way
- · Codex Alimentarius specifically allows for this testing

Prof Heinemann recommended "that Smartstax should benefit from a risk assessment which, if it provides sufficient evidence of safety, would result in its listing in the [FSANZ table of approved crops]". He finished by commenting on the FSANZ approval:

"The informal nature of its approval for use in food provides me with no confidence that the regulator [FSANZ] has identified and then considered unintended changes that have the potential to cause adverse effect".

Fran Murrell from MADGE said "I am horrified that our regulators have secretly approved this GM corn. Australians could be eating it in products like corn chips, tacos, tortillas, processed foods and even infant formula later this year."

"If MADGE (@MADGEAustralia) had not been such a determined Twitterer and investigator, we would not know what is about to land on our plates. Is our regulator FSANZ protecting the public's right to safe food or GM companies' desire to profit from their patented chemical crops?"

MADGE would like Smartstax to undergo a safety assessment with opportunities for full public comment: We would like information to include:

- The amount of toxin and pesticide residue on Smartstax plant.
- How these residues and any new or altered proteins or genetic constructs are likely to affect humans, particularly babies, children, pregnant and breastfeeding women, the elderly, people with existing conditions, and animals fed on this crop.
- Details on how the ~34 novel constructs in the GM genes are interacting with each other and with the usual corn DNA in the plant
- Whether any new or altered proteins or new or altered DNA or RNA transcripts are being produced by the Smartstax plant,
- The full genetic characterization of the plant, and how the GM constructs and placement sites differ from the four individual GM lines.
- Details on how pesticide residues are affecting the micronutrient levels in the plant

MADGE would like to know that all food ingredients fully or partly produced using this crop are fully labeled as 'genetically modified'.

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Health Canada was the target of whistleblower microbiologist Dr Shiv Chopra's book "Corrupt to the Core", which detailed his time at Health Canada. It was launched to federal members of parliament in Canberra last year, where Dr Chopra told MADGE that we could expect the same from our authorities.

http://www.cban.ca/Press/Press-Releases/CFIA-s-Irresponsible-Rubber-Stamping-of-New-GE-Corn
http://www.inspection.gc.ca/english/plaveg/bio/bt/smartstaxe.shtml

- http://www.foodstandards.gov.au/_srcfiles/Standard_1_5_2_GM_v117.pdf
- http://www.i-sis.org.uk/SmartstaxMaizeAMedelyOFTransgenes.php
- http://cera-gmc.org/index.php?evidcode=MON89034+x+TC1507+x+MON88017+x+DAS-59122-7&hstIDXCode=&gType=&AbbrCode=&atCode=&stCode=&coIDCode=&action=gm_crop_database&mode=Submit
- http://www.foodstandards.gov.au/consumerinformation/gmfoods/gmcurrentapplication1030.cfm
- we suggest contacting FSANZ through its CEO.
- Bio: Jack Heinemann is a professor of genetics and molecular biology in the School of Biological Sciences at the University of Canterbury and is a senior adjunct scientist at GenØk Centre for Biosafety in Tromsø, Norway. Jack was previously a staff fellow at the US National Institutes of Health Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases. He holds a double undergraduate honours degree in biochemistry and molecular biology from the University of Wisconsin Madison and a PhD in molecular biology from the University of Oregon.

Jack has been a member of the American Society for Microbiology (ASM) his entire professional life and is also a member of the New Zealand Society of Microbiology. He received the ICAAC Young Investigator Award from the ASM in 1993 and was the recipient of the New Zealand Association of Scientists Research Medal in 2002. He was appointed to the UN Roster of Biosafety Experts in 2005. Jack and his research group publishes extensively in the internationally peer-reviewed scientific literature. He recently served the UN FAO as author of their study paper on transgene flow (approved by an intergovernmental panel) and a consortium of international agencies as a lead author and synthesis author on the International Assessment of Agriculture Science and Technology for Development Report (adopted by an intergovernmental panel).

His main research interests are microbial genetics with particular fascination with how genomes emerge from mobile collections of genes, as exhibited in rapidly evolving traits such as antibiotic resistance, virulence and metabolic pathways. This interest has awakened him to human behaviours that can influence the evolution of such traits and the responsibility for academics to exercise their role as critic and conscience of society on these matters.