

American Association of Grain Inspection and Weighing Agencies



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Issue Report: New Syngenta Corn Variety Sparks Concern

A new biotech corn seed variety released by Syngenta has caused concern from grain companies, producer groups, and others because the variety, while approved for U.S. use, has not been approved at this time for use by Japan, Mexico, or any other foreign markets.

The seed variety, Syngenta's Agrisure™ Rootworm trait (MIR 604) was de-regulated by USDA's Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service on March 16, 2007, after the agency found no adverse health or environmental concerns. Syngenta had received previous authorizations for the seed variety from the U.S. Food and Drug Administration and U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. The variety has not received full regulatory approval from key foreign markets, causing concern among grain industry and producer groups over the possibility of even a small amount of the unapproved seed finding its way to an export shipment and creating trade issues.

Industry Concerns

The National Corn Growers Association (NCGA), National Grain and Feed Association (NGFA), and the North American Export Grain Association (NAEGA) had all voiced their concern to Syngenta over the new variety and asked that the variety not be released for planting in the United States. NCGA's biotechnology policy calls on biotech providers to obtain regulatory approval at least by Japan. Meanwhile, NGFA and NAEGA argue that such approvals should be obtained first in the U.S. grain export markets that have functioning, science-based biotech regulatory systems.

The grain trade associations, NGFA and NAEGA, on April 4 urged Syngenta to "... reconsider and reverse its plan to commercialize its Agrisure RW™ biotechnology-enhanced corn seed for planting this year because it has not obtained regulatory approval for food and feed use in Japan and other U.S. export markets." NGFA and NAEGA said "... Syngenta's 'ill-conceived' plan risks endangering U.S. corn and corn product exports." The associations said, "We already are aware that Japanese buyers are developing contingency plans to purchase corn and corn products from non-U.S. origins if Syngenta releases this seed for planting and Japanese government approval is not forthcoming prior to harvest."

Syngenta Program Calls for Channeling

For its part, Syngenta says it will be implementing a comprehensive grower communication/commitment program. The program is designed to inform all Agrisure™ RW corn hybrid growers of the fact that Agrisure™ RW hybrids do not currently have import approval in Japan and, until that approval is granted, grain produced from Agrisure™ RW hybrids must be directed to domestic uses and away from export channels.

Key Points

- *Following approval from U.S. regulatory authorities, Syngenta has released a new biotech corn variety.*
- *The variety has not received approval from Japan or other foreign markets, sparking grain trade concern that a minute amount of the unapproved variety could find its way to export channels and create trade issues.*
- *Several railroads have said they will not transport corn containing any amount of the new variety.*
- *A quick test for the new variety is under development and should be ready by fall. Once GIPSA certifies the test, grain inspection agencies will be able to offer this testing service to customers.*

Other Developments

State governmental agencies, railroads, and biofuel interests have expressed concern or moved to take steps related to the Syngenta hybrid.

- ▶ In Minnesota, State Agriculture Department officials initially stopped the distribution and sale of the new biotech hybrid because it didn't comply with state regulations. However, Syngenta reported on April 26 that Minnesota had lifted its "stop sale" order on the hybrid.
- ▶ The Burlington Northern Santa Fe Railway, the Canadian Pacific Railroad, the DM&E Railroad and the IC&E Railroad have all announced they will not accept for transportation any carloads of corn or corn products containing any amount of Syngenta's Agrisure™ RW corn seed, according to the NGFA. Other carriers currently are considering their policies, NGFA said.
- ▶ The Renewable Fuels Association has asked Syngenta to take steps to make sure the corn variety is not sold to ethanol producers which could then find its way into distiller's dried grains, given the significant export markets that exist for such co-products.

Testing Technology

Syngenta says that currently a PCR test is under development and will be available for testing grain for the presence of Agrisure™ RW. Syngenta said it also believed a lateral flow strip test, although limited in its sensitivity, is desired by some in the grain trade and that the firm is working with independent labs to develop a reliable test and hope that can be achieved soon.

Don Kendall, acting director of the Technical Services Division at USDA's Grain Inspection, Packers and Stockyards Administration (GIPSA), says he is optimistic that a quick test will be available before the fall harvest season. He said GIPSA is working with several test kit manufacturers and Syngenta and that good progress is being made toward a quick test. He said the quick test could be either a lateral flow strip test or an ELISA-type test, although at this stage it appears more likely the quick test will be an ELISA test. **Once GIPSA certifies the performance of the quick test, grain inspection agencies will be able to provide this testing service to their customers.**

In Sum

AAGIWA asked a grain quality expert with a major grain company to characterize the nature of the firm's concern with the new biotech seed using a scale of 1 to 10 with 10 being the worst.

"Using that scale, we would rate our concern at 150. Industry experience with StarLink and Herculex have shown that channeling does not work – Herculex essentially shut down U.S. corn gluten feed sales to Europe. Even if a farmer is as careful as possible, his neighbor might be growing the hybrid and with pollen drift the farmer could end up with a product that is not marketable. Our company has had countless meetings on how to deal with this very important issue."

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Further information on issues surrounding the Syngenta biotech corn variety may be found on these websites:

- Grain Elevator and Processing Society (GEAPS), www.GEAPS.org (GEAPS members only)
- National Grain and Feed Association, www.ngfa.org (NGFA members only)
- National Corn Growers Association, www.ncga.com
- North American Export Grain Association, www.naega.org
- Burlington Northern Santa Fe Railway, www.bnsf.com/markets/agricultural/index.html