

PHILIPPINES AWAIT SUPREME COURT DECISION ON GM EGGPLANT TESTS

The Philippine Supreme Court is expected to decide shortly whether to accept a demand from the environmental group Greenpeace to stop the field testing of genetically-modified (GM) eggplant (brinjal), on the grounds that the potential impact on other eggplant varieties has not been adequately assessed.

Greenpeace has asked the court to issue a cease and desist order (CDO) to stop the field testing of Bt (*Bacillus thuringiensis*) eggplant, and thus prevent what it describes as the contamination of traditional eggplant varieties.

But proponents of biotechnology are worried that such a move could cast a cloud over the country's ambitious plans to produce and market more GM crops.

The tests, conducted by the University of the Philippines Los Banos, are due to be carried out on a variety of Bt eggplant that has been genetically modified to resist infestations of the fruit and shoot borer, a major pest that can lay to waste as much as 70 per cent of the annual eggplant crop.

At present, many farmers rely on chemical pesticides to prevent infestation, spraying many times per growing season, and supporters of the new variety argue that it could make this unnecessary.

Greenpeace argues that there is still too little information about its potential impact.

We are not against science, said Daniel Ocampo, a Greenpeace campaigner. But because of the lack of long-term impact studies on GM eggplant, the government should have adopted precautionary measures before carrying out the field tests.

But Emiliana Bernardo, an entomologist and a member of a government's technical panel which assesses the safety of GM foods, has dismissed the critics' claim.

What is wrong with [other] eggplant varieties gaining resistance against destructive pests? Bernardo asked, noting that eggplant is one of the most heavily sprayed crops, and arguing that the Bt eggplant could be a safer alternative.

The Philippines is the only country in Asia to have approved the commercial planting of GM crops for food. The first of such crops is the Bt maize that is now planted in nearly 700,000 hectares, more than double the area planted to the crop in 2007.

We say that these have to stop, Ocampo said, pointing out that local researchers are looking at a variety of new GM crops.

Aside from the Bt eggplant, other GM varieties expected to be ready for testing in the next couple of years are the rice fortified with vitamin A and a papaya with a longer shelf life (achieved through delaying the ripening process).

Ocampo says that, aside from seeking a delay to the approval of the testing of GM eggplant, Greenpeace is seeking to change the whole process by which GM crops are approved.

Regulators and proponents of biotechnology argue that the country's biosafety requirements are the strictest in the region, and point out that they are being used as a template by other nations embarking on biotechnology research and development.

But Ocampo denies that this is true, pointing out that government agencies such as the Department of Trade and Industry and the Department of Agriculture are opposed to a labelling bill, arguing that it would push up prices and scare away potential investors.

We want consumers to have the option to buy a GM food or an organic one. The public have the right to choose what to eat.

Source: <http://www.scidev.net/global/biodiversity/news/philippines-await-supreme-court-decision-on-gm-eggplant-tests.html>