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New rules needed for future GE rice research?

*Feb 20, 2008 9:45 AM, By Elton Robinson
Farm Press Editorial Staff*

USDA oversight regulations for GE rice research need changing, according to panelists speaking at the National Alliance of Independent Crop Consultants annual meeting in Seattle. But will new rules — which are to be posted on the Federal Register this month — prevent future accidental release of GE lines into the commercial rice supply?

The proposed rules come on the heels of a USDA/APHIS investigation into the release of LLRICE 601 into the commercial rice supply in August 2006. A USDA investigation traced the incident to one variety, Cheniere, and 2003 lots of foundation seed of the variety.

“We determined that LLRICE 601 had been placed in the Cocodrie variety and grown on the same research farm (LSU AgCenter’s Rice Research Station in Crowley, La.) with Cheniere for three growing seasons,” said USDA’s Emily Pullins, branch chief, Compliance and Inspection Branch, Biotechnology Regulatory Services (BRS). Both varieties were under evaluation for development in 1999-2001, under a Bayer CropScience contract.

The investigation revealed that commingling of GE and commercial lines occurred in 2000, but they could not make a definitive determination if cross-pollination occurred.

Pullins said researchers implemented a 16X safety factor for distance. “The closest that the two varieties had been planted to each other was 165 feet. At the time, the required isolation distance was 10 feet, so they were well beyond what had been required.”

BRS was not able to obtain parent material that had been in the field trial during the time frame. “It was simply gone. We were also not able to obtain certain records that might have been useful.”

To aid in future investigations, BRS is now reconsidering isolation distances, “and we’re trying to set up some requirements for record keeping and the maintenance of samples for testing.”

Pullins noted that a secondary phase of the investigation occurred after February 2007, when another GE line unapproved for export, LLRICE 604, was detected in the variety CL 131. An investigation showed that CL 131 and the Cocodrie variety containing the LLRICE 604 trait “were not grown at the same time, but were grown in the same place. The indication was that some type of mixture had to have occurred, rather than cross-pollination, sometime between 1999 and 2000.”

Both GE rice lines LLRICE 604 and LLRICE 601 have the same added protein, commonly referred to as the PAT protein, which has been safely used in other deregulated products for more than 10 years.

Possible rule changes from this incident also include stricter record keeping requirements, according to Pullins, “but we also realized we needed to start thinking about the proximity of GE breeding to non-GE breeding. Should we encourage or require that breeding efforts be separated physically? We are pondering this.

“We realize we also need to encourage the industry to move into quality management systems as a way to keep a handle on things.”

BRS subsequently created the Biotechnology Quality Management Program as a voluntary program “to help those who receive permits from us manage their trials in the best way possible to meet regulatory requirements.”

The proposed rule changes are to be posted on the Federal Registry in February, for public comment, according to Pullins. To make comments online when new rules are posted, click <http://www.gpoaccess.gov/fr/index.html>.

Panelist Greg Yielding, U.S. Rice Producers Association, Little Rock, Ark., says too much is at stake to not put sufficient resources into regulating GE rice research.

“We have to be very careful as farmers, as consultants, or anybody making money related to agriculture. We lost 6 percent of volume in the rice market (to the Liberty Link incident). The EU said they were going to test the rice when it got there. Well, who is going to test rice here, ship it over there, have GE material found and then have to ship it back? How many hits like that can you take?

“We need to be very careful about how we go about policing these research plots. There was a 2005 Inspector General’s report that

found numerous deficiencies in what was being done. The system is broken.”

As a Dexter, Mo., rice consultant, Amy Beth Dowdy is “right in the middle” regarding GE rice research. “I need new technology, but I also have customers who sell the product to people who don’t want it right now. And there was a limited time to sell one of the varieties that was shown to have GE traits.”

Impacts continued long after the 2006 rice crop was sold, noted Dowdy. “Rice producers were forced to deal with new regulations, which cost them quite a bit more money. And we had two major rice varieties not available for planting.”

Cheniery and CL 131 accounted for about 33 percent of southern rice acreage in 2006. Cheniery alone accounted for about 25 percent of the acreage planted in Louisiana, Arkansas and Mississippi. CL 131 would have seen significant increases in acreage due to red rice issues, according to Dowdy.

“GE rice is definitely a tool needed by U.S. farmers,” Dowdy said. “Our biggest obstacle to acceptance of GE crops is education of the end user and the consumer of the GE product. The stigma applied to GE has got to be changed. We have to move forward. We have to find a way to correct the problems we have.”

El Campo, Texas consultant Dan Bradshaw said, “The Liberty Link issue will continue to have a lingering effect on rice farmers and the rice industry for years to come. Because of our litigious society, the lawyers have started coming out of the woodwork and have agitated the situation, along with buyers who try to drive the price down and panic the farmers. There were a multitude of lawsuits from farmers, seed growers and dealers. Even growers who did not grow Cheniery or CL 131 still have had to defend themselves and have spent hundreds of thousands of dollars.

“We need the Liberty Link type of technology because the Clearfield technology could start to break down by crossing with red rice. Once that takes place, red rice will become established and we won’t be able to kill those red rice plants with Newpath herbicide.

“So we need the herbicide technology. These issues need to be resolved where everyone will have confidence in our system.”

email: erobinson@farmpress.com

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