

## Pea Weevil

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### Pea Weevil

**DV** - Lila Rajiva - Pea weevil takes a 30% whack out of Australia's \$100 million pea industry and the GM strain, which inserted a bean gene into the peas that the pesky weevil could not digest, was touted to reduce the need for insecticide to tackle the problem.

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**Lila Rajiva**

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A \$3 million, ten-year trial of genetic modification (GM) on field peas at The Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organization (CSIRO), Australia's national science research organization, was scrapped last week (November 18, 2005) when the GM pea caused inflammation in the lungs of mice it was fed to. (1)

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But scientists at the John Curtin School of Medical Research in Canberra who led the immunological research found that when inserted into the pea, the bean gene triggered an immune reaction in mice. Their results were published in the Journal of Agricultural and Food Chemistry.

Slight as it seems, the case has fired up the anti-GM movement and may even have the potential to derail the biotech juggernaut. Point by point, here's why:

\* Though CSIRO insists that the case shows that regulating GM does work, it does no such thing. Instead, it shows up the alarmingly weak science behind GM. Greenpeace spokesman Jeremy Tager said that Food Standards Australia New Zealand (FSANZ) approved a type of GM corn, Mon863, for consumption even though it had caused "serious organ damage" to rats

in Germany. The FSAZ also claimed publicly that the rat study did not mean the corn was unsafe?.

The problem gets worse in the US, which unlike Australia, does not even have a scientific body that really studies GM food before springing it on the public. With rather touching trust, the FDA leaves the job of guarding public health to the biotech industry. So the only reason we know that Monsanto's soy is OK for human beings is because Monsanto says so.

The FDA's convenient see-no-evil stance goes back to a 1992 policy which claims GM foods don't differ from other foods in any meaningful or uniform way. But documents revealed by a lawsuit years later tell a different story. It seems the FDA's own experts did indeed think that GM foods were hazardous, but they were shunted aside by the FDA's policy chief, none other than ex-Monsanto attorney and future vice-president Michael Taylor. Any wonder that a FDA microbiologist dismisses the agency's GM policy as a political document without scientific basis. Ultimately, the FDA keeps all regulation of GM voluntary, even the industry's massaged and poorly designed studies. (2)

\*CSRO's deputy director T. J. Higgins trots out the hoary claim beloved among biotech flacks that "people have been eating GM food for 10 years and there isn't a single piece of evidence that it's any less safe than conventional food."

Also not true. There is evidence that biotech is not safe. True, it's limited but only for the astonishing reason that in the history of biotech there have been fewer than 20 peer-reviewed studies that pass the academic smell test and no human clinical trials. There were just five papers published in peer-reviewed journals until June 2000. (Jose Domingo, Science, June 9, 2005)

And the treatment meted out to one of them -- the Pusztai-Ewan paper -- illustrates just why there have been so few. (3) Arpad Pusztai, a respected biologist from Rowett Research Institute in Aberdeen, Scotland, conducted a series of experiments with Stanley Ewan on potatoes inserted with a gene from the snowdrop plant. Rats fed the potatoes sustained organ damage and depressed immune systems. Pusztai also found that GM destabilized the genome of the potato, a finding that suggested that GM, unlike other breeding methods, might cause unpredictable and uncontrollable effects that could contaminate non-GM crops. In 1998, before the research was even completed, Pusztai was savaged by the British scientific establishment and forced out of his position at Rowett even though independent scientists in other countries

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validated his work Rowett was reported to have received ?140,000 from Monsanto before the blow-up.

Truth is, scientists who look like they might create obstacles for the biotech profit machine, are usually dropped like, well, hot potatoes.

That?s why the pea trial is important. Especially, following on the heels of another bombshell ignored by the press. About a month ago at the Russian National Association for Genetic Security, Dr. Irina Ermakova described how within three weeks, half of a group of rats fed GM soy died, compared to less than a tenth from a non-GM soy group and little over 5% of non-soy controls. Within two weeks of feeding, the pups of the GM-fed rats were also significantly lighter in weight. (4)

Ermakova used Monsanto?s Roundup Ready soy which has genes inserted that let it withstand Monsanto?s ?Roundup? brand of herbicide. But we?re not just talking herbicides and pesticides. About 85% of the soy grown in the US is Roundup Ready and soy derivatives, including oil, flour and lecithin, are found in the majority of processed foods sold in the US. That means many Americans eat ingredients derived from Roundup Ready soy every single day.

And that?s the bottom line. Everyday most of us eat a GM food that has been demonstrated to kill living creatures and affect their offspring. Any wonder that soy allergies skyrocketed in the UK by 50% after GM soy was introduced; that in Russia, allergies tripled in the three years when GM foods were widely introduced; and that food-related sicknesses in the U.S. doubled between 1994 and 2001, when many GM foods entered the supermarket. (5)

It?s not the activists but biotech groupies who need to put up or shut up. If they can?t prove their products are clean, time for them to take them off the shelf and get into another line of business.

Lila Rajiva is a free-lance writer in Baltimore and the author of *The Language of Empire: Abu Ghraib and the US Media* (Monthly Review Press, 2005). She can be reached at: [lrajiva@hotmail.com](mailto:lrajiva@hotmail.com)

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\* Lila Rajiva will discuss The Language of Empire in Seattle, Portland, Oakland and Sacramento in mid-December. [Click here for more details.](#)

### NOTES

1) ?GM Pea Causes Allergic Damage in Mice,? Emma Young, New Scientist, Nov. 21, 2005.

2) ?Labeling Issues, Revolving Doors, rBGH, Bribery and Monsanto,? Sourcewatch, November 1, 2005.

3) ?Hot Potato: Excerpt From 'Don't Worry It Is Safe To Eat,'? Andrew Rowell, ZNET, July 23, 2003.

4) ?Genetically modified soy affects posterity: Results of Russian scientists? studies,? Regnum News Agency, October 31, 2005.

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(5) Jeffrey M. Smith, *Seeds of Deception: Exposing Industry and Government Lies About the Safety of the Genetically Engineered Foods You're Eating* (Yes! Books, September 2003).