

Lax Oversight Found in Tests of Gene-Altered Crops

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The Department of Agriculture has failed to regulate field trials of genetically engineered crops adequately, raising the risk of unintended environmental consequences, according to a stinging report issued by the department's own auditor.

The report, issued late last month by the department's Office of Inspector General, found that biotechnology regulators did not always notice violations of their own rules, did not inspect planting sites when they should have and did not assure that the genetically engineered crops were destroyed when the field trial was done.

In many cases, the report said, regulators did not even know the locations of field trials for which they granted permits.

The regulatory branch "lacks basic information about the field test sites it approves and is responsible for monitoring, including where and how the crops are being grown, and what becomes of them at the end of the field test," the report said.

The audit results are likely to renew calls by environmental groups for tighter regulations. "Over all, I thought the report was devastating," said Margaret Mellon, director of the food and environment program at the Union of Concerned Scientists in Washington.

Critics say genetically engineered crops could cause environmental harm, if, say, a gene for herbicide resistance spread to weeds, making them harder to kill.

In addition, the critics say, there could be harm to public health if a crop genetically engineered to produce a pharmaceutical or industrial chemical, for instance, accidentally found its way into the food supply.

The audit did not find any instances of known harm to public health or the environment.

However, the report said that weaknesses in regulations and in the internal management controls at the Department of Agriculture "increase the risk that genetically engineered organisms will inadvertently persist in the environment before they are deemed safe to grow without regulation."

In a written response, the Agriculture Department's Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service, which regulates biotech field trials, said that it was already taking steps to adopt

23 of the 28 recommendations made by the inspector general, and that more changes were on the way.

W. Ron DeHaven, the administrator of the service, known as Aphis, wrote in the response, "Since 1987, Aphis has safely regulated G.E. organisms and provided oversight and enforcement for over 10,000 field tests with no demonstrable negative environmental impacts having arisen from these tests."

A biotechnology industry spokeswoman said the report would have little effect because changes were already under way. "This is a report that was pretty much obsolete before it was ever published," said the spokeswoman, Lisa Dry of the Biotechnology Industry Organization.

The inspector general's office, however, said that further improvements would be required beyond those already planned.

Field trials are used to test experimental genetically engineered crops. Crop developers proposed to use 67,000 acres for such tests in 2004, up from 8,700 acres in 1994.

Once crops have proved themselves in field trials, the Agriculture Department can deregulate them, and seeds and harvested crops can be sold pretty much like any other seeds and crops.

The main varieties of genetically modified corn, cotton and soybeans grown in the United States have been deregulated.

The audit was conducted from May 2003 to April 2005 and involved visits to 91 field test sites as well as looking at records. The report said auditors found 13 instances of violations of rules at 11 of those sites.

One of the most controversial areas of agricultural biotechnology involves genetically engineering crops to produce pharmaceuticals or industrial chemicals. The Agriculture Department has stricter requirements for those crops than for genetically modified crops meant for food or animal feed.

However, the new report said the department often failed to enforce those stricter requirements. In most cases the auditors checked, the sites were not inspected five times each during field tests, as the department had promised. Nor were they inspected twice after the trial to make sure the crop was destroyed and the field fallow.

The report said that in two cases large harvests of pharmaceutical crops remained in storage for more than a year after the field test ended with regulators' not knowing of the storage facility or approving it.