GeneWatch UK

Tonio Borg
European Commissioner for Health and Consumer Policy
DG SANCO
European Commission
B - 1049 Brussels
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Dear Commissioner Borg,

Imports of genetically modified insects in fruit

We are writing to draw your urgent attention to the imminent open release of genetically modified (GM) fruit flies in Brazil and the potential illegal entry into the EU market of fruit containing the eggs and larvae of genetically modified (GM) insects. It is urgent to take action to protect European consumers from this situation.

A decision was made on 10th April 2014 by the Brazilian biotechnology regulator CTNBio to grant approval for open release experiments using genetically modified (GM) fruit flies (*Ceratitis capitata*) in fruit orchards in Juazeiro, Bahia, Brazil.[1] In 2013, more than two thirds of Brazilian fruit was exported to the UK and the Netherlands, with significant quantities also being exported to Spain, Germany, Portugal, France and Italy.[2] It is currently unclear what steps, if any, the Brazilian authorities will take to prevent fruit exposed to GM fruit flies as part of this experiment from entering the food chain. No system has been adopted for the safety testing of such GM insects in the EU, nor is any system in place for the traceability and labelling of food products produced using GM insects.

The open release experiments will be conducted by the Brazilian company Moscamed using GM Mediterranean fruit flies and large numbers (many millions) of male GM fruit flies are likely to be released to mate with wild female flies in an attempt to suppress the population. The GM fruit flies are likely to be genetically engineered to utilise a female-killing mechanism which results in the death of most of the female offspring at the late larval stage.

[1] Organização Social Biofábrica Moscamed Brasil. Processo 01200.000073/2013-31. (Atendimento à Diligência) Liberação Planejada no meio ambiente intitulada: "Estudo de avaliação de Ceratitis capitata transgênica com objetivo de redução populacional da praga em áreas de fruticultura de Juazeiro, Bahia"˙(RN6). Item 3(3.1) on: http://www.ctnbio.gov.br/upd_blob/0001/1880.pdf

[2] Tropical triumph for Brazilian fruit exports. Fresh Fruit Portal. 23rd January 2014. http://www.freshfruitportal.com/2014/01/23/tropical-triumph-for-brazilian-fruit-exports/?country=united%20kingdom

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Female Mediterranean fruit flies lay their eggs inside many types of fruit, such as oranges, lemons, mangoes and peaches. The eggs hatch inside the fruit and remain there, feeding on the fruit until they leave to pupate in the soil. The adults fly limited distances, but the global fruit trade can transport infected fruit over thousands of miles. In contrast to most pest control approaches, GM Mediterranean fruit flies are likely to remain in large numbers inside the fruit, since this is the life stage at which the majority of the female offspring of the GM fruit flies are expected to be genetically programmed to die. This means that many millions of dead GM larvae could enter the food chain, as well as living GM eggs and larvae (including from the male GM offspring which are expected to survive and breed) being transported with the fruit.

As such it is clear that urgent action is needed on this issue to prevent irreversible contamination of the European food chain and to protect human health, the environment and consumer choice. Please can you inform us as soon as possible of the actions you will be taking to protect EU consumers, and EU businesses who may be unaware that they are importing and selling illegal GM products.

We look forward to hearing from you.

Yours sincerely



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