Pandora's Picnic Basket?

Concern is growing that unapproved genetically engineered crops could find their way into the food chain. Industry experts say it's time for a wake-up call and stress the importance of better monitoring practices

'Contamination of one crop can cause a widespread problem that can't be tracked or recalled' 'The number of inspections and audits conducted by federal and state inspectors has gone down due to decreasing budgets' By Joy LePree

STATISTICAL SOUP

OK, so it's not exactly an "attack of the killer tomatoes," nor is it a plague of locusts of Biblical proportions, but the accidental release of Bayer CropScience's LLRICE 601, a genetically modified strain of rice that had not yet received USDA approval for commercialization, into commercial stocks of long-grain rice is expected to have a significant economic impact on Bayer CropScience as well as U.S. rice farmers and exporters. The trouble began in July when Bayer's own test results indicated that LLRICE 601 was detected in some commercial supplies of long-grain rice in storage bins in Arkansas and Missouri. The company notified the USDA and the FDA, and by mid-August the story made national headlines.

GMO FOOD FIGHT

While opponents of biotech foods implied that this renegade rice was a horrific problem, it actually posed no human health, food safety, or environmental risks, according to USDA's Agriculture Secretary Mike Johanns. "It was never a human or animal health hazard," says Tom Deeb, executive consultant at ASI Food Safety Consultants. "This rice contains the same gene technology that we've been using on corn and soybeans for over a decade to make them resistant to weed control products. Bayer just never asked for permission to commercialize the product and without that approval it shouldn't have entered the food chain." "The protein found in LLRICE 601 is the same protein that's been approved for use in other products, and it is considered safe," says Cindy Smith, deputy administrator for the USDA's Animal and Plant Health

Inspection Service's (APHIS) Biotechnology Regulatory Services program. Bayer's prepared statement regarding safety is that "the protein [found in LLRICE 601] is well known to regulators and has been confirmed safe for food and feed use in a number of crops by regulators in many countries including the EU, Japan, Mexico, U.S., and Canada." As a matter of fact, Bayer already has two products, LLRICE 62 and LLRICE 06, which are based on the same protein, approved but not yet in the commercial realm, says Smith.