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Post: Mexico

Honey Producers Concerned with A Biotechnology Approval

Report Categories:
Biotechnology - GE Plants and Animals
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Honey
Agriculture in the News
Agricultural Situation

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Report Highlights:
The presence of trace genetically enhanced (GE) pollen in Mexican honey is not known to pose any risk to humans or non-target organisms - including honey bees. However, the European Court of Justice has ruled that honey which contains trace amounts of pollen from GE crops authorized for human consumption in the by the European Union (EU) must be labeled if the amount of GE pollen surpasses 0.9%. Therefore, all honey shipments from Mexico must undergo lab tests to identify and quantify the type of GE presence.

General Information:
On September 6, 2011, the European Court of Justice (ECJ) ruled that honey which contains trace amounts of pollen from genetically enhanced (GE) crops must be labeled and undergo thorough research before it can be sold to the public. Pollen is not a GE organism as once in honey, it loses its capability to fertilize. This scientific clarification is in line with previous legal understandings. Mexican honey producers concerned that they may face barriers selling their product to their main exports markets in the European Union as GE soybean is now approved for commercial planting in Mexico.

This ruling comes after a lawsuit filed by a German honey farmer claiming that a field test of GE corn (MON810) in 2005 "contaminated" the plants used by his bees for making honey. The ECJ ruled in favor of the German plaintiff - a ruling that could offer grounds for beekeepers in the region (Bavaria) to claim compensation in a German court.

The judges have ruled that the pollen contained in honey must be seen as an ingredient (according to labeling directive 2001/13 Art. 6.4 a)**,** "irrespective of whether the pollen is introduced intentionally or adventitiously into the honey". This is a crucial new interpretation. The interpretation to date (on the side of the EU Commission and supply chain operators) has always been that pollen is a natural component of honey rather than an ingredient. Many parties consider this new interpretation legally and scientifically erroneous. As an ingredient, any pollen (whether GE or not) would have to be labeled putting added costs on producers.

Mexican Honey Producers Alarmed:
Mexico exports roughly 25,000 metric tons (MT) of honey on any given year – primarily to the EU. The presence of trace GE pollen in Mexican honey is not known to pose any risk to humans or to non-target organisms (including honey bees). However, Mexican honey producers have expressed great concern with their government's recent approval of GE soybeans for commercial production – particularly since the European Court of Justice ruled that honey which contains trace amounts of pollen from GE crops authorized for human consumption in the EU must be labeled if the amount of GE pollen surpasses 0.9%. As a result of the ruling, and since GE soybeans may now be planted commercially in Mexico, all honey shipments from Mexico must undergo laboratory testing to identify and quantify the type of GE presence. As a result, Mexican honey producers are faced with paying for the mandatory testing and, if found to have more than 0.9% GE pollen, new labeling before their products can be sold to European consumers.

In the past 20 years, Mexican regulators always considered the possibility that bees could come into contact with the pollen of the GE plants in their risk assessments and that small amounts of GE pollen could be introduced into honey that was produced in the vicinity. The main information that was used for these risk assessments were (1) information about the toxicity (or absence of toxicity) of the newly expressed proteins in the GE plants for humans or non-target organisms (NTO), and (2) an estimation of the accidental exposure of humans or NTOs to GE plant pollen. Mexican regulators developed risk assessments which looked at all safety issues before permitting up to 253,000 hectares of land to be used for planting commercial GE soybeans (GAIN Report MX2035).

Post Comments:

The recent approval of commercial GE soybean production is another step in Mexico's cautious approach towards biotechnology policy with corn still a major question. This controversy regarding soybeans and honey is an example of the overall sensitivity surrounding the development of biotechnology in Mexico.

For More Information

FAS/Mexico Web Site: We are available at www.mexico-usda.com or visit the FAS headquarters' home page at www.fas.usda.gov for a complete selection of FAS worldwide agricultural reporting.

Other Relevant Reports Submitted by FAS/Mexico:

Report Number	Title of Report	Date Submitted
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MX2017	Mexico Approves 4 Additional GE Corn Pilot Tests	03/25/2012
MX2001	GE Corn Pilot Tests Approved	01/06/2012
MX1100	Mapping Mexican Corn and Implications for Biotech Development	12/21/2011
MX1086	Biotech Corn Permits Being Reviewed-November Update	11/18/2011
MX1070	2011 Biotech Corn Permits Being Reviewed	09/20/2011
MX1056	2011 Biotech Annual: Mexico Authorizes First Commercial Biotech Cultivation	07/15/2011
MX1054	June Cotton Update	06/30/2011
MX1102	2010 Biotech Corn Permits Issued	01/26/2011