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USDA approves genetically modified rice

By SAM HANANEL

WASHINGTON

The Department of Agriculture has granted preliminary approval for a large-scale plan to grow genetically altered rice in Kansas, prompting some critics to raise safety concerns.

Sacramento, Calif.-based Ventria Bioscience wants to grow rice modified to produce human proteins on more than 3,000 acres of farmland near Junction City, Kan.

The pharmaceutical rice would be harvested and refined for use in medicines to fight diarrhea, dehydration and other illnesses that kill millions of infants and toddlers each year.

While Kansas officials have embraced the project as a boon to the state's emerging biosciences industry, environmentalists and some food groups warn the proteins could find their way into the food chain, causing medical reactions or allergies.

"We're opposed to the production of pharmaceutical and industrial chemicals in food crops grown outdoors because we think there are too many ways contamination of the food supply could occur," said Karen Perry Stillerman, senior analyst at the Union of Concerned Scientists, a science advocacy group.

The USDA released a draft environmental assessment on Wednesday that concluded planting the rice poses virtually no risk. No commercial rice is grown in Kansas and Ventria will use dedicated equipment, storage and processing facilities to prevent seeds from mixing with other crops, the USDA said. The rice will be milled on site.

"We have a product here that can help children get better faster," said Ventria president and CEO Scott Deeter. He said any concerns are "based on perception, not reality" given all the precautions the company is taking.

"It's a dedicated supply chain all throughout the process," Deeter said.

But Stillerman said weather events, like tornadoes, could carry seeds into other fields where contamination could occur. She also cited the possibility of human error in transporting and handling the rice.

Genetically modified crops are regulated by the USDA. State governments can review safety procedures and suggest more stringent regulation of the companies before a permit is issued.

Ventria has faced opposition to growing pharmaceutical rice in other states from farmers and environmental groups. When Ventria tried to grow the crop in southeast Missouri, beer giant Anheuser-Busch Cos. threatened to boycott all rice from the state if the plan was allowed.

The company won approval in 2005 to grow its rice on smaller plots in North Carolina, which also has no commercial rice farming.

USA Rice Federation spokesman David Coia said his group opposed genetically engineered rice in Missouri, but is not taking a position on the Kansas plan.

"Where there would be a threat to commercial rice crops, we certainly would take an interest, but that doesn't appear to be the case in this instance," Coia said.

Kansas Gov. Kathleen Sebelius and other officials have enthusiastically welcomed Ventria to the state. The company plans to spend \$6 million to renovate an abandoned grocery distribution center in Junction City and could eventually contract with farmers to grow rice on 30,000 acres.

Rep. Jerry Moran, a Republican whose district includes Junction City and most of western Kansas, said he has heard no complaints from farmers.

The public has until March 30 to submit comments to the USDA. If final approval is granted, Ventria will begin planting rice in April or May, Deeter said.

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