

Fear VS Fear: What s worse, acrylamide or genetic engineering?

By ACSH Staff — November 10, 2014



If it were not so deadly serious, it would be rather amusing to

see arguments over the latest approval of a genetically engineered crop potatoes by the USDA. According to a recent [column](#) [1] in the *New York Times*, the J.R. Simplot company has altered some potato genes to decrease the production of acrylamide when the spuds are cooked at high temperature, such as in French fries. So folks who tend to worry over any chemical they hear is in foods must applaud this development. Who will win out the GMO-antagonists or the acrylamide-fearful? Or, if we re fortunate, science and the public?

As far as ACSH is concerned, this is a case of two unwarranted fears bumping up against each other. Until 2002 when Swedish scientists discovered that acrylamide could be found in high-carbohydrate foods cooked at high temperatures, no one was the least concerned about it. Since then, however, people have been concerned about the chemical because some high-dose studies show some link between acrylamide and cancer in rats, which has [nothing to do with human cancer](#) [2]. Indeed, industrial use of acrylamide is widespread, with no increased incidence of cancer in those who are exposed to it. More information on acrylamide can be found [here](#) [3].

And of course a cottage industry has grown up around the supposed risks of genetic engineering and as soon as one charge has been dealt with, another one is dreamt up. This is certainly true of the recently approved potato. Even though the manufacturer (Simplot) took great pains to emphasize that there are no foreign genes added to this potato, those who fear it are now concerned about how the potato s own genes have been altered. As usual, these fears are baseless. Scientifically sound information about the use of genetic engineering and agriculture can be found in ACSH s publication, [Food and You](#). [4]

As someone who worries about neither acrylamide in foods nor genetic engineering of food crops, commented ACSH's Dr. Ruth Kava, it will be interesting to see which fear will win out. She continued, The real question is whether or not producers and their customers will use the newly-approved potato, or pusillanimously hesitate out of fear of consumer backlash and for that we will just have to wait and see.

In other biotech news, Monsanto and Dow AgroSciences plan to challenge Hawaii's Maui County regarding their narrowly approved ban on the cultivation of all GMO crops including GE test crops. A statement from Monsanto says: We believe this referendum is invalid and contrary to long established state and federal laws that support both the safety and lawful testing and planting of GMO plants. Dow also made a statement on their plan to fight the ban which they believe is illegal: We understand the negative impact that this ban would have on the community, the local economy and on agriculture in Hawaii.

ACSH's Dr. Gil Ross added this: The head-in-the-sand approach to progress exhibited by the know-nothings in Maui must be condemned in the strongest possible terms. Not only because scientifically and from a public health perspective, we know there is nothing to fear; but even more importantly, banning even experimentation with such plantings smacks of the Catholic Church's approach to Galileo's astronomical studies in the 17th century: they don't even want to know the facts, so scientific progress must be shut down. Unbelievable in the 21st century.

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- [1] http://www.nytimes.com/2014/11/08/business/genetically-modified-potato-from-simplot-approved-by-usda.html?module=Search&mabReward=relbias%3Ar%2C%7B%221%22%3A%22RI%3A6%22%7D&_r=0
- [2] <http://acsh.org/2004/11/a-new-book-from-the-american-council-on-science-and-health/>
- [3] <http://acsh.org/2002/06/low-fact-diet-the-acrylamide-case/>
- [4] <http://http://acsh.org/2014/03/food-guide-modern-agricultural-biotechnology/>