Old McDonald(s) had two farms- yet no harms

By ACSH Staff — November 18, 2014

What appears to be a big decision by McDonald’s [1] to keep using their current potatoes rather than switch to GM potatoes turns out to be, at least scientifically, no decision at all. This is because on this particular issue, it makes no difference what they decided. They were choosing between the lesser of two non-evils.

While this decision might, on the surface, seem to be a safety issue it is nothing of the sort. It is purely a business decision.

Here are the issues:

Standard potatoes contain the amino acid asparagine. Since it is one of the 20 amino acids found in protein, you eat it every day. There is nothing even remotely unsafe about it. But when heated in the presence of starch, (think: french fries) it forms very small amounts of the chemical acrylamide something that is routinely referred to as a carcinogen by chemical haters, who neglect the fact that our foods contain such a minuscule amount that it is ridiculous to even talk about [2].

The GM potatoes, which are called [3] the Innate genetically modified potato, were engineered to contain less asparagine, and therefore produce less acrylamide upon cooking. This is solving a non-problem.

As ACSH’s Dr. Josh Bloom, a big fan of irony, points out: McDonald’s managed to find itself in the uneviable position of having to choose between two phony scares. Do they want a bunch of loonies protesting with signs in front of their stores complaining about Frankenfries, or do they want to be accused of serving carcinogens to people? It’s almost funny.

Since we at ACSH base our opinions on science, here is our answer: Who cares? We don’t. McDonalds made a calculated business decision to continue selling a product that would frighten fewer people by choosing to reject the GM potato. They concluded and rightly so that more people would be worried about GM rather than the acrylamide (which almost no one has ever heard of) present in a french fry they already enjoy. Since there is no threat from either, we don’t really care.
which choice they made.

Dr. Bloom says. I probably would have made the same decision, simply for business reasons. Anti-GMO activist groups many of which are funded by the gigantic organic food industry have done a splendid job of scaring people away from GM products, which are no more or less safe than older varieties. If McDonald's chose to use the GM crop, you'd better believe that Burger King would launch a We are not going to kill you with our fries campaign faster than you can say Big Mac.

Amusingly enough, Burger King is up to a different marketing ploy gluten-free fries. No we are not kidding [4].

Just to clarify, the new biotech potato was not even meant to be used by the fast food market, according to an article in the CapitaPress [5]. The grower of the new Innate potatoes, the J.R. Simplot Company, was not aiming its potatoes at the fast food market, but rather at the fresh-cut market. A company spokesperson was quoted: [We have] conducted a survey that shows most consumers see Innate technology as akin to traditional breeding, since the variety incorporates genes from wild and cultivated potatoes rather than totally unrelated species.

ACSH's Dr. Ruth Kava says While I would have been pleased to see McDonald's flout the anti-GMO horde by adopting the Innate potato, from a scientific or public health point of view, there is no issue of contention here. I do hope that Simplot is successful in its efforts to sell them via other routes. Time will tell whether consumers will be willing to try the new variety. According to the company, she continued, consumers have responded well to education about the Innate potato, which bodes well for its eventual acceptance.

It is really unfortunate that consumers fear GM foods and products. In the end, this is about you guessed it business, not science. Just like almost everything else. But, at least, in this case money did not force the company to make the wrong decision. Just a different one.

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