

Posted on Sat, Mar. 31, 2007

## Rice industry rejects bioscience plan

By Sam Hananel

Associated Press Writer

WASHINGTON --

The U.S. rice industry wants the federal government to reject a plan to grow genetically modified rice in Kansas, saying the country's growers would suffer "financial devastation" if modified crops contaminate the commercial supply.

Agriculture Department officials are considering a request by California-based Ventria Bioscience to grow rice engineered to contain human proteins on hundreds of acres of farmland near Junction City, Kan.

The proteins can be turned into medicines to combat diarrhea, dehydration and other illnesses that kill millions of children in developing countries each year.

But in comments submitted this week to the USDA's Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service, the USA Rice Federation says rice producers cannot risk the loss of foreign markets that are spooked by the possibility that genetically modified rice could be mixed with edible rice.

"If Ventria's pharmaceutical rice were to escape into the commercial rice supply, the financial devastation to the U.S. rice industry would likely be absolute," the group said. "There is no tolerance, either regulatory or in public perception, for a human gene-based pharmaceutical to end up in the world's food supply."

The USDA granted preliminary approval for the Kansas project last month after concluding it poses virtually no risk. The rice will be grown hundreds of miles from other rice farms and will use dedicated equipment, storage and processing facilities to prevent seeds from mixing with other crops.

Still, the rice growers point to recent instances that call into question how effective safety precautions can be.

The rice industry is still reeling from the discovery last year of an unapproved strain of genetically modified rice, Liberty Link Rice 601, found in grain elevators. In another incident earlier this month, traces of unapproved genetic material were found in yet another type of rice seed.

Federation spokesman David Coia said both incidents disrupted foreign rice sales and have forced the industry to insist on stricter regulation. The rice growers want

government regulators to determine potential health effects if pharmaceutical rice is eventually found in commercial rice.

"The cavalier 'trust us' approach should be considered the relic of a bygone era," Coia said Friday.

Ventria president and CEO Scott Deeter called comparisons to the Liberty Link incident unfair because pharmaceutical rice is subject to much more stringent regulations.

"We have a totally dedicated supply system," Deeter said. "We don't sell seed and it's a closed system of production. We use dedicated equipment all throughout."

Deeter points to support from the American Farm Bureau and several Kansas farm groups that say they are satisfied with safety precautions.

Kansas officials have welcomed Ventria as part of an effort to grow the state's bioscience industry. No commercial rice is grown in Kansas, but environmental and food safety groups contend weather or human error could eventually contaminate rice in other states.

Deeter said he hopes final permit approval will come in the next few weeks so rice planting can begin in April.

---

Associated Press Writer John Hanna in Topeka, Kan., contributed to this report.

- [USA Rice Federation](#)
- [Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service](#)
- [Ventria Bioscience](#)