

One Potato, Two Potato, Five Potato, None: The Demise of Monsanto's Genetically Engineered Potato

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The Canadian government has approved 5 varieties of Bt potatoes - potatoes genetically engineered with genes from the soil bacterium *Bacillus thuringiensis* (Bt) to be resistant to the Colorado potato beetle - all of which are owned by Monsanto. But none of these are currently on the market in Canada or the U.S. - Monsanto says they stopped selling the potatoes because they captured less than 5% of the North American market.

Gone But Not Forgotten

You might remember that in 1999 the New Brunswick based company, McCains, declared that they would not use the Bt potatoes because it was clear that consumers did not want them. But consumer protest and slim market share are not the only reasons the genetically engineered (GE) potato has disappeared from the field.

In fact, a major problem was environmental. The eventuality of insects developing resistance to the Bt toxin has always been a concern with the introduction of Bt crops, but this was viewed by the Canadian Food Inspection Agency (CFIA) as a risk that could be "managed" rather than an environmental hazard that should keep Bt potatoes from being approved. However, a 1998 CFIA audit of Monsanto's test sites for two new Bt varieties revealed the failure of this strategy and in the end Monsanto could not manage this risk or accurately follow the guidelines for commercial growing (From Access to Information documents obtained by Ken Rubin for the Canadian Health Coalition). For example, Monsanto was supposed to inform farmers of the measures they needed to take to minimize the risk of insects developing resistance. Farmers should have been asked to maintain "refuges" which are areas planted with non-GE potatoes designed to slow resistance by giving the beetle somewhere else to go, but in this case many refuges were actually being sprayed with insecticides, defeating their very purpose. In the face of these widespread problems, Monsanto took the potato off the market.

Secret Deals With Monsanto

What happened to the Bt potato can tell us a lot about the poor planning and arrogance of companies in trying to push GE food acceptance on consumers as well as corporations' reckless attitude towards the environment, but how the Bt potato got to market in the first place also reveals a great deal about corporate power and its influence inside government.

In the end, it took a secret deal between Monsanto and the CFIA and Health Canada for the two new Bt varieties to be approved in 1999. When the CFIA discovered the "extremely poor" field tests they asked Monsanto for more data - but Monsanto refused. Health Canada stated, "Monsanto objected to these requests; believing that their data adequately supports their conclusions that these products present 'no significant environmental, feed or food safety risk'". To obtain the data from Monsanto, the departments struck a deal with the corporation where they pledged to speedily decide on the approval of the potato - within 30 days of receiving the information. Internal memos show that John Doessetor, the senior advisor to the then Minister of Health Alan Rock, was kept up to date on these negotiations - a highly unusual situation since the Minister's office is not supposed to be directly involved in product reviews. But this is not the end of the story since two years, after the secret deal, John Doessetor was hired by Monsanto to be the corporation's top lobbyist in Ottawa, "responsible for the development and implementation of Monsanto's government affairs strategies in Canada."