



**Californians
For GE-Free
Agriculture**

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Californians for GE-Free Agriculture is a coalition committed to ecologically responsible and economically viable agriculture. We provide education, training and resources in support of the rights of farmers and communities to protect themselves from the environmental, human health and economic risks of genetic engineering in agriculture.

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Californians for GE-Free Agriculture

NEWSLETTER NUMBER 12, May 2005

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1. Farmer opposition keeps Ventria out of Missouri!

For the second year in a row and in a second state, Ventria Bioscience's plans to plant large fields of pharmaceutical rice in rice-producing regions have been thwarted by alliances of farmers, millers, environmentalists and food safety organizations working together.

As we reported in the April newsletter (<http://www.calgefree.org/news/newsletter11.shtml>), Ventria, the Sacramento-based company that was stopped from planting pharmaceutical rice in California last year by farmer and citizen opposition, subsequently moved to Missouri to try its luck there. Their plan, backed by the Missouri Department of Agriculture, the governor and a private Missouri university, was to grow up to 205 acres of their drug-producing rice in the Bootheel region, the heart of rice country. But the scheme drew the weighty opposition of the Missouri rice farmer advocacy association and the largest rice mill in the world, Riceland Foods.

Beer giant Anheuser-Busch also originally condemned Ventria's proposed planting and threatened to boycott Missouri rice. They backed down after striking a backroom deal with politicians and Ventria investors that mandated that pharmaceutical rice must be planted 120 miles from the Bootheel rice-growing region. This compromise forced Ventria to find a new field trial site and re-apply for a USDA permit. This, combined with the pressure brought to bear on the USDA by concerned groups such as Cal GE-Free, held the process back long enough to prevent Ventria from being able to plant in Missouri this season - a major victory for Missouri farmers.

It is clear that Ventria had prepared itself for this eventuality as early as March when it first caught wind of resistance in Missouri. At that time the company hastily applied for a permit to plant five acres of pharmaceutical rice in North Carolina and because of the small size of the field trial the permit was granted in three weeks with no USDA

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environmental assessment. (Note: Cal GE-Free is part of a national coalition advocating an Environmental Assessment on all pharmaceutical crops.) Ventria has since increased its request to a total of 70 acres, and public comment on the USDA Environmental Assessment is being accepted until June 3. We are working with several organizations to submit comment on this application. It is exceptionally late to be planting rice this season, and Ventria's persistence is likely bluster at this point, preferable to admitting obvious defeat.

There is every indication that the company's maverick behaviour is causing it to lose friends even within the biotech community. Another firm, Agennix Inc., has been producing the same drugs Ventria's pharm rice does, but in yeast under safe, contained laboratory conditions. Agennix has publicly stated that it is possible to manufacture these human proteins at least as economically in the laboratory, challenging one of Ventria's main arguments for putting the food supply at risk with their pharm crops! "Our actual costs," says Rick Barsky, chief executive officer of Agennix Inc, "are comparable to [Ventria's] best guess of their projected costs."

Ventria has applied to the Food & Drug Administration for "GRAS" status (Generally Recognized as Safe) for the human proteins produced by the pharm rice, lactoferrin and lysozyme. This would allow them to include these proteins in food without further regulatory oversight. We have learned that lactoferrin is currently undergoing Phase II clinical trials for the treatment of cancer and diabetic ulcers, which should disallow a GRAS status according to FDA's own rules.

The Ventria situation will not likely disappear, in spite of all of the opposition they have met with in California and Missouri. We will continue to monitor their actions and call upon you to voice your opposition to their plans when needed!

2. California Liability update

Landmark legislation has been introduced to the California legislature — the Integrity and Farmer Protection Act, AB 984 (John Laird, D-Santa Cruz). Under this legislation, California farmers, handlers and food processors are protected from liability for unintended genetic contamination; rather, the GE product manufacturer would be responsible for economic harms due to loss of non-GE markets.

As we reported in the April newsletter (<http://www.calgefree.org/news/newsletter11.shtml>), the bill passed through its first committee, the Assembly Judiciary Committee, with a 6 – 2 vote. Testifying in favor of the bill at that committee were Ron Lee, a California rice farmer, and Andrew Kimbrell, a lawyer for the Center for Food Safety. Since then, the bill has also been heard at the Agriculture Committee, where it was not voted upon but was held over until 2006. Testifying in favor of that bill at that hearing were Chip Struckmeyer, a rice producer, and Nell Newman of Newman's Own Organics. Among those testifying against

the bill were the California Cattlemen's Association, the California Seed Association, and a cotton farmer named Don Cameron who grows GE, organic cotton and conventional cotton.

The holding of the bill until 2006 is an important success, giving supporters time to broaden familiarity with the issue among farmers and legislators, and gather the endorsements needed to move it to the Assembly next year.

3. State Legislation blocks communities' democratic rights to oppose GE crops

Cal GE-Free and our allies are keeping a close eye on the California legislature for signs of the introduction of legislation containing language that would prevent counties, towns and cities from introducing ordinances, resolutions, or other legislation regulating seeds at the local level, including GE crops (see April newsletter for background on this 'pre-emption legislation'). A total of 12 states have passed similar types of legislation and three more (Texas, North Carolina and Ohio) have introduced it. It may not be a coincidence that the North Carolina legislature saw the introduction of a seed bill very close to the time that Ventria was granted a permit for field trials for pharmaceutical rice. This is another clear sign of how pre-emptive legislation is being used as a tool to prevent communities from restricting the introduction of new GE crops.

4. Ignacio Chapela granted tenure!

On May 16th, Ignacio Chapela, the University of California at Berkeley, an ecologist and well-known critic of biotechnology and of growing corporate influence on university research agendas, was finally granted tenure after five years of fighting the university for it.

When his application for tenure was rejected despite almost unanimous support within his department, there was widespread conviction that Chapela's views that challenged the interests of the genetic engineering industry were at the root of the decision. In 2001, Chapela and graduate student David Quist published research in the journal Nature showing that genes from genetically engineered corn had contaminated a traditional variety grown by subsistence farmers in rural Mexico. Three years earlier Chapela had spoken out against an alliance between UC Berkeley's Department of Plant and Microbial Biology and the biotech company Novartis.

Public outcry and Chapela's own legal action against the university both brought the issue into the public eye and undoubtedly contributed to the new chancellor's decision to reinstate Chapela as a tenured professor.

5. Help build the Californians for GE-Free Agriculture grassroots network

As one of the largest agricultural economies in the world, California has the opportunity to become a leader in safeguarding our public and

private lands, fisheries, forests, schools, gardens, and nurseries, from GE contamination. If genetic engineering is an issue that you are concerned about and you want to get involved in local action, here are some steps to take:

1. If you are not already a member, sign-on to the Cal GE-Free listserv www.calgefree.org to receive this newsletter and action alerts.
2. Contact [Becky Tarbotton](#) at (415) 561-2523 to find out whether there is an active GE-Free group in your area.
3. If there is no GE-Free group in your area, consider asking local community groups (church groups, environmental groups etc.) to see if you could make a presentation to them about the issue. Cal GE Free can help by providing information and talking points and offering suggestions.
4. Festival season is coming up! Cal GE Free can provide you with fliers, talking points and sign-up sheets to set up a table at your local festival or Earth Day celebration to connect with other activists interested in GE.
5. Organize a screening or house party of the new 'The Future of Food' and use this as an opportunity to collect names of people who would be interested in starting a group.

Finally, please consider a donation to Californians for GE-Free Agriculture.

You can make a secure, tax-deductable donation on line at: <https://secure.groundspring.org/dn/index.php?aid=2709>

- OR -

Send a check payable to Cal GE-Free at:

15290 Coleman Valley Rd., Occidental, CA 95465