

China: Public Has Doubts Over Modified Food

in

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Nearly 70 percent of Chinese consumers in a recent survey expressed objections to genetically modified rice.

The survey result was released on Tuesday by Greenpeace China, which had polled 1,300 people who ranged in age from 18 to 55 and lived in six cities in the country.

"We chose Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou to sample as first-tier cities, Changsha and Wuhan as second-tier cities, and we also hired a research company to conduct the survey in Hong Kong," said Fang Lifeng, campaigner for Greenpeace China's food and agriculture project.

The survey found that about 60 percent of Chinese consumers were against all kinds of genetically modified food, including rice, oil and soymilk.

The most severe objections came in response to the use of genetically modified rice in baby food. The rejection rate for such products was 77 percent in large cities and 83 percent in smaller cities.

Meanwhile, the survey found most consumers do not know that the government has approved certain varieties of genetically modified rice for scientific research.

In the survey, only 17 percent of the respondents who hailed from first-tier cities and 26 percent of those from second-tier cities knew that two types of genetically modified rice were granted bio-safety certificates by the Ministry of Agriculture in August 2009.

The certificates indicate that food is safe for human consumption.

Even with the approval, genetically modified rice may not be planted outside laboratories without the permission of the health and quality inspection sectors.

Greenpeace China nonetheless has reported that commercial cultivation is already occurring illegally in rice fields in Hubei province, Hunan province and other places. And genetically modified rice noodles were spotted in the Guangzhou market.

But Hunan province denied the accusations in March 2010, saying that no evidence of genetic modification had been found in samples taken from the 32 brands of rice sold locally.

Moreover, 56 percent of the respondents living in large cities and 65 percent in smaller cities said they hope to have a say in the formation of policies concerning genetically modified foods.

"Since rice is the principal food of the Chinese people, and since we consumers have the right to decide what we put in our mouths, the government should give us a voice on the issue of genetically modified rice," said Xu Di, 24, a Shandong resident.

Sarah Burton, deputy program director of Greenpeace International, said: "It seems to me that a situation similar to European consumers' war against genetically modified food is unfolding in China."

Monsanto, a US-based company, first exported genetically modified soy to Europe in 1996, an act that originally roused minor resistance among consumers. But the protests grew as time went by, eventually gaining support from farming organizations, environmental non-governmental

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organizations and restaurants.

The European Union instituted a moratorium on the cultivation of genetically modified crops in 1999 and extended it in 2004, sparking a new round of fights that have lasted until now.

Xu Weigang, an agriculture expert in Henan province, compared genetic modification to mankind's use of nuclear reactors. He said the risks posed by both largely depend on how the technologies are managed.

"China has drafted strict regulations and deployed a rigorous mechanism to make its use of such technology safe," he said. "The majority's objections partly result from there not being enough information about it."

Although public opinion in China tends to be suspicious of genetically modified food, engineered soy bean oil and corn now account for a considerable share of the food found in the domestic market, he said.

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