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Biotechnology

French Food Safety Agency Reports Benefits of Biotech to Human Health

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Report Highlights:

According to a scientific report recently issued by the French government, the French Food Safety Agency (equivalent to the FDA in the United States), has come up with definite conclusions indicating that, under certain circumstances, biotech crops can be beneficial to human health. The reports explicitly says that the production of new crops that are resistant to insects would have a doubly positive impact on both farmers and consumers' health by lowering their exposure to pesticides and to mycotoxins. The entire text of the French Food Safety Agency report can be found on <http://www.afssa.fr/ftp/afssa/2004-SA-0246-Benefices-OGM.pdf>.

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The authors of the report studied four cases: the insect resistant corn, the glyphosate resistant sugar beet, the Vitamin A enriched rice and some genetically modified micro-organisms. The study was conducted by analyzing scientific reports from various sources focusing on the production and processing of biotech crops.

Accordingly, the AFSSA report shows that cultivation of biotech crop, especially insect resistant crops, allows farmers to reduce their uses of pesticides. This is especially true for cotton, and to a lesser extent, for corn. AFSSA underlines that development of biotech crops in developing countries would be especially beneficial to the health of farmers, because most farmers apply pesticides without proper protective outfit.

The report also underlines that use of biotech corn lead to a significant drop in mycotoxin levels in corn products. AFSSA experts say that this is part of the unexpected benefits of biotech corn. Because there are fewer insect damages on the leaves and kernels of the corn, fewer moulds can develop. Lowering of mycotoxin contamination is certainly beneficial for the cattle fed with feeding biotech and non-biotech corn, especially cattle raised for human consumption. However, AFSSA recognizes that more studies have to be undertaken to fully assess such benefit. The report by AFSSA pointed out that to prevent the development of insects resistant to biotech corn, production must include patches of non biotech corn where traditional insecticides would still have to be used.

The cultivation of a glyphosate resistant sugar beet could also be beneficial to the environment; but, not much for human health. Today, sugar beet growers use as many as seven different herbicides, which are considered, if used properly, as harmless for human health. Beet processing leaves no herbicide residues in sugar. However, AFSSA suggest that biotech beet cultivation could be at least beneficial to the farmers' health since they would have only one product to apply.

The French AFSSA (FDA equivalent in the United States) reports also studied potential benefits of producing vitamin A-enriched rice. Without fully supporting this biotech crop, the reports concludes that the scientific development of such a rice for developing country is not an utopia and is even a reality.

The AFSSA report was more cautious on the development of genetically engineered micro-organisms: the lack of scientific data does not allow the experts to conclude on the potential benefits or danger of these products.

The French AFSSA report concludes that any scientific evaluation of the overall potential risk of biotech crops is arduous since no health problem such as toxicity or allergy has ever been directly linked to a biotech crop. For AFSSA, such conclusion does not mean there is no risk, but as of today, such risk cannot be precisely identified nor quantified. For AFSSA experts, today's debate in France and Europe on biotech solely focuses on risk, never on benefits; hence their report focuses on potential benefits.

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