



Ideas Changing the World

Daily Policy Digest

Environment Issues

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The USDA's Anti-Science Activism

A comprehensive environmental review by U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) scientists concluded that a genetically engineered alfalfa variety was substantially equivalent to other conventional varieties and posed no genuine risks. USDA Secretary Tom Vilsack chose to ignore those findings and pandered to the organic food lobby by announcing that the Agriculture Department might forbid farmers to plant the alfalfa variety on huge swaths of American cropland, say Henry I. Miller, a fellow at the Hoover Institution, and Gregory Conko, a senior fellow at the Competitive Enterprise Institute.

- Organic farmers -- who produce less than 1 percent of the nation's agricultural output -- have long complained that the cultivation of biotech crops jeopardizes their own production because plants of the same species can cross-pollinate with one another.
- Organic farmers may not use the products of biotechnology, but unintended cross-pollination by a neighbor's genetically engineered plants could in certain circumstances "contaminate" organic crops.
- A federal court even rescinded the USDA's initial approval in 2005 of a biotech alfalfa variety on the grounds that the department failed to complete an Environmental Impact Statement addressing the issue of "coexistence" between genetically engineered and conventional varieties.

But even after the USDA's subsequent environmental review concluded that coexistence was not a problem, Vilsack nevertheless sowed confusion and concern among American plant breeders and farmers by proposing geographic restrictions as well as minimum separation distances from other crops for the commercial cultivation of the genetically engineered alfalfa variety, say Miller and Conko.

Source: Henry I. Miller and Gregory Conko , "The USDA's Anti-Science Activism," Cato Institute, Summer 2011.

For text:

<http://www.cato.org/pubs/regulation/regv34n2/regv34n2-6.pdf>

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