

Legal challenge to genetically altered crop

Charles Arthur
Science Editor

The introduction of genetically engineered maize to Europe is being opposed by Austria, which will mount a legal challenge to the crop's use, and has banned it from import.

The decision was described as "a hugely significant step in the fight to keep genetically engineered products out of Europe" by the environmental pressure group Greenpeace. It came the day after the head of the

frozen-food company Iceland described as "unacceptable and frightening" the introduction of such products without clear consumer labelling.

The new maize, developed by Ciba-Geigy, has an added gene which makes it resistant to antibiotics. It is intended to be fed to livestock, though British government scientists have expressed worries that its use in animal feed could lead to "superbugs" – bacteria which cannot be killed by standard antibi-

otics. Although the UK opposed the EU approval of the maize, which was finally granted on 18 December, it has accepted imports of the crop. But now Austria, which had also opposed it, has challenged the decision under Article 16 of the EU rules – that it might present a risk to human health or the environment. Under EU law, the Commission must now reconsider its decision within three months.

Meanwhile, the US Environmental Protection Agency chose the

pre-Christmas rush to slip out the news that it has approved the new maize, which could now be planted in the US from next spring.

Ciba-Geigy has fought hard to have the maize approved after spending millions of pounds developing it.

Earlier this year, genetically modified soya beans developed by the US company Monsanto made up 2 per cent of the US crop – but were not separated from the rest of the harvest. Soya is used in thousands of

foods, from chocolate to bread to baby food.

Malcolm Walker, chairman and chief executive of Iceland, said: "Millions of ordinary people are very worried about genetically modified foods and I am one of them."

Genetically modified tomato paste and some cheeses have been on sale in shops for almost a year, but are clearly marked, giving the consumer a choice. However, the genetically modified soya beans were mixed, unlabelled, with ordinary soya in the

Americas and put into world-wide distribution.

"The American public seem at ease with this – most Europeans and certainly the British are not. And I for one find it frightening," said Mr Walker, himself a member of Greenpeace. "It is totally unacceptable that American companies should dictate to us in this way. We must demand total traceability for all food and clear labelling." He said that at Iceland, maize and soya were from totally traceable sources. He criticised the

food minister Angela Browning, noting that she had backed an EU agreement on novel food regulation, but omitted to mention exceptions to labelling requirements.

"Sorry, totally unacceptable – consumers have a right to know about every genetically engineered product," Mr Walker said. "Government action is needed on two counts – we must know the source of products and labelling must be mandatory. It doesn't seem much to ask – yet to date neither is in force."

Handwritten note:
a Bacteria
Na efiricidig aad Xapi
Gzar co Japa na wia
n dnu has Jecu.
Owep adwipa an
awap p...
Lm