



OP-ED RESPONSE TO:

“Biotech instills fear and loathing in California rice belt”

Paul Elias, Associated Press Wire Service

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Article poses greater threat to California rice industry than biotech

In late August, the U.S. rice industry received unexpected and upsetting news. Trace amounts of regulated, genetically engineered (GE) rice were found in samples taken from commercially produced long grain rice. The announcement by U.S. Department of Agriculture Secretary Mike Johanns stunned the industry.

The California Rice Commission’s response to this or any issue is to provide accurate, factual information in a timely manner. To this end, a great deal of effort was put into providing Associated Press writer Paul Elias with comprehensive testing results and industry information regarding this event, and in obtaining interviews with researchers and rice industry leaders.

So, it was disappointing to read the October 16, 2006 AP article “Biotech instills fear and loathing in California rice belt” picked up by the Washington Post online, which did not include basic, well-documented facts surrounding the issue. While the article is well-articulated and the message that the GE event has far-reaching ramifications is clear, the information, as presented to its readers, is misleading and begs for clarification.

Most disturbing is the insinuation that Japan has threatened to “ban all U.S. imports.”

In response to the August 18 announcement by USDA, Japan immediately suspended the import and processing of all U.S. long grain rice. While Japan receives 50 percent of our export product and is a primary export market for the California rice industry, it receives only California medium and short grain rice. The announcement had no affect on California.

On September 27, Japan lifted the import suspension and announced that it would instead begin testing shipments of U.S.-origin short and medium grain rice and rice stocks.

Because extensive testing had already demonstrated that this event is not present in the long, medium or short grain foundation or basic seed supplied to California rice farmers, California responded by stating that the testing was duplicative and unnecessary. However, California and U.S. authorities have, and continue, to work well with Japanese representatives on all aspects of this issue. A disagreement on process does not directly translate to a schism in trade between two countries.



Mr. Elias goes on to restate that “Japan would ... shut down all U.S. imports if it found any more biotechnology crops” that test positive. This speculative statement is untrue, and unsubstantiated.

Japan has clearly stated that it will pull and test rice samples from U.S. shipments bound for Japan before the cargo leaves the dock. Japan has clearly stated that a positive test will result in a rejection of that one shipment. At no time has Japan indicated that it intends to cease its rice trade with the U.S. based on testing results. In fact, AP issued a correction on the afternoon this piece printed stating that its reporting on a Japanese ban was “erroneous.”

Though widely reported in all news accounts of the issues, there are two other facts that are not directly stated in Mr. Elias’ article. First, the regulated event in question is called Liberty Link 601. The LL601 event was identified by USDA in long grain rice, in a variety not produced in California. Secondly, although this LL601 event has never been used or tested at California’s Rice Experiment Station, the station submitted multiple samples of all 24 varieties of its foundation and basic seed for testing by independent, approved laboratories in late August and again in early September. All testing results returned as non-detect, and confirm that this Liberty Link event is not present and has not affected long, medium or short grain rice produced in California.

Mr. Elias researched and wrote a respectable story, and brought attention to the significance of the rice industry to the Sacramento Valley. With regard to this issue, California’s rice industry has taken aggressive action since the August announcement to clearly demonstrate that this Liberty Link event is not present in any California-source rice varieties – this includes ensuring that factual information is consistently available.

The California Rice Commission represents the entire California rice industry, including all the rice growers and handlers who annually farm and process rice produced on approximately 500,000 acres in the Sacramento Valley. More information about the rice industry and the LL601 event is available online at calrice.org.

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