

US approves 3 types of genetically engineered potatoes (Update)

February 28 2017, by Keith Ridler



This October 2016 photo supplied by Simplot Plant Sciences shows Innate Gen. 2 potatoes surviving in a field infected with late blight disease at Michigan State University in East Lansing, Mich. Federal officials said three types of potatoes genetically engineered to resist the pathogen that caused the Irish potato famine are safe for the environment and safe to eat. (Nico Champouret/Simplot Plant Sciences via AP)

Three types of potatoes genetically engineered to resist the pathogen that caused the Irish potato famine are safe for the environment and safe to eat, federal officials have announced.

The approval by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and the U.S. Food and Drug Administration late last week gives Idaho-based J.R. Simplot Company permission to plant the potatoes this spring and sell them in the fall.

The company said the potatoes contain only potato genes, and that the resistance to late blight, the disease that caused the Irish potato famine, comes from an Argentine variety of potato that naturally produced a defense.

The three varieties are the Russet Burbank, Ranger Russet and Atlantic. They've previously been approved by the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

All three varieties "have the same taste and texture and nutritional qualities" as conventional potatoes, said Simplot spokesman Doug Cole.

Late blight thrives in the type of wetter conditions that led to the Irish potato famine in the 1840s. Potatoes were a main staple, but entire crops rotted in the field. Historical records say about a million people died of starvation and disease, and the number of Irish who emigrated might have reached several million.

Potatoes in modern times are considered the fourth food staple crop in the world behind corn, rice and wheat. Late blight continues to be a major problem for potato growers, especially in wetter regions. Fungicides have been used for decades to prevent the blight.

Simplot says the genetically engineered potatoes reduce the use of

fungicide by half.

The company said the potatoes will also have reduced bruising and black spots, enhanced storage capacity, and a reduced amount of a chemical created when potatoes are cooked at high temperatures that's a potential carcinogen.

Conventional potatoes can turn a dark color when cooked after they were kept cold for too long, a problem Simplot said the three new varieties reduce. The company also said the enhanced cold storage will likely have significant ramifications for the potato chip industry by reducing trucking costs.

There is no evidence that genetically modified organisms, known as GMOs, are unsafe to eat, but for some people, altering the genetic code of foods presents an ethical issue. McDonald's continues to decline to use Simplot's genetically engineered potatoes for its French fries.

Simplot often notes the potatoes contain only potato genes, and not DNA from an unrelated organism. Organisms that contain DNA from an unrelated organism are defined as transgenic.

The Washington state-based Non-GMO Project that opposes GMOs and verifies non-GMO food and products said Simplot's new potatoes don't qualify as non-GMO.

"There is a growing attempt on the part of biotechnology companies to distance themselves from the consumer rejection of GMOs by claiming that new types of genetic engineering ... are not actually genetic engineering," the group said in a statement.

The most recent federal approvals apply to Simplot's second generation of Innate potatoes. The first generation that went through the federal

approval process didn't include protection from late blight or enhanced cold storage.

The first generation of Innate potatoes has been sold in stores under the White Russet label. Cole said the company hasn't decided how it will market the second generation.

The company is currently at work on a third generation that Cole said will have protections against additional strains of late blight, all coming from genes within the potato species.

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