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Press Release

GM Wheat rejected by 233 Consumer, Farmer Groups in 26 Countries

Embargoed to February 9, 2010

Ottawa, Montreal, Washington, Tokyo, Sydney: 233 consumer and farmer groups in 26 countries have joined the “Definitive Global Rejection of GM Wheat” statement to stop the commercialization of genetically modified (GM) wheat and remind the biotechnology corporation Monsanto that genetically modifying this major crop is not acceptable to farmers or consumers.

The 233 groups signed the rejection statement first launched by 15 Australian, Canadian and U.S. farmer and consumer groups in June 2009.

“Canadian farmers have just lost their export sales to Europe and other markets because of GM flax contamination from a GM variety deregistered a decade ago and never even sold. Our current experience with GM flax contamination clearly illustrates the crippling losses Canadian farmers will suffer if GM wheat is introduced,” said Terry Boehm, a flax and wheat farmer and President of the National Farmers Union in Canada. “Flax is yet another warning that once a GM crop is introduced, contamination is inevitable.”

In July 2009, Monsanto announced new research into GM wheat and industry groups kicked their promotion of GM wheat into high gear. But widespread farmer and consumer resistance defeated GM wheat in 2004 and this global rejection remains strong, as demonstrated by today’s statement.

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“In 2004, a coalition of Japanese consumer and food industry groups delivered a petition to the Governments of Canada and the U.S. urging them not to introduce GM wheat. Today, consumer rejection of GM wheat in Japan is just as strong as ever. 80 organizations in Japan have already signed the rejection statement,” said Keisuke Amagasa of the Tokyo-based No! GMO Campaign. “A large majority of consumers here in Japan are voicing their strong opposition to the cultivation of GM wheat. We see strong opposition from all sectors of society.”

Japan’s flour companies are also rejecting GM wheat, echoing consumer opposition. In a statement released today, the Flour Miller’s Association of Japan wrote to the No! GMO Campaign indicating its opposition.

“Under the present circumstances, with all the doubts about safety and the environment that the consumers in Japan have, including the effect on the human body from GM foods, GM wheat is included among the items that are not acceptable for the Japanese market,” Kadota Masaaki, senior managing director of the Flour Miller’s Association wrote to the No! GMO Campaign.

In the U.S., a recent report from the Western Organization of Resource Councils, a network of seven community farmer, rancher and consumer organizations, shows that U.S. wheat prices could fall by 40 percent or more if industry efforts to develop GM wheat succeed.

“U.S. family farmers will do everything to protect our wheat from Monsanto and we do not accept that any corporation has the right to patents on life, including seeds,” said Dena Hoff from the National Family Farm Coalition in the U.S. “GM wheat would contaminate our crops and food supply, and put an end to organic grain production. Farmers in the U.S. have already rejected GM wheat and Monsanto is sorely mistaken if they think farmers will ever accept GM wheat.”

“The big push is on from Monsanto to pave the way for GM wheat but the reality is that strong and widespread opposition from farmers and consumers in Australia and across the world is here to stay,” said Laura Kelly from Greenpeace Australia Pacific.

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Survey: Japan's Wheat Importers Reject GMO

The No! GMO Campaign has conducted a survey, clearly showing that Japanese wheat companies do not want to import or handle genetically modified wheat that consumers do not desire

In June 2009, there were renewed efforts in North America to introduce genetically modified wheat for commercial cultivation. Canadian Biotechnology Action Network, a citizen group based in Ottawa, started a global campaign to reject GM wheat. By January, 2010, some 177 groups from 23 countries have signed the appeal to stop the commercialization of GM wheat. We are pleased to see that groups in Europe, Asia and South America have also joined the campaign.

In 2004, when Monsanto first applied for permission to sell GM wheat to farmers in the United States and Canada, our No! GMO Campaign led the efforts to stop the cultivation. We visited farmers and companies in the US and Canada, explaining that Japan would not buy GM wheat. If this did not stop Monsanto, we found that the strong push from Japan's flour milling industry had the desired effect. At that time, the wheat importers made a strong and unified appeal to reject Monsanto's GM wheat.

We decided to once again confirm the status of the Japanese flour milling industry, to make sure that their opinion has not changed. In December, 2009 we sent a questionnaire to 24 companies that are members of the Seifun Kyoukai (Japan's Flour Millers Association). We also included a strongly worded statement, emphasizing that consumers in this country do not want to eat foods made with genetically modified wheat.

We received replies from 9 companies by December 25, 2009. We did not get answers directly from any of the large flour companies, but instead we were pleased that Seifun Kyoukai, the major flour milling association, sent a reply on behalf of their member companies. 3 companies referred to the reply from the flour milling association in their letters to us, noting: "Japan's Flour Millers Association has published a statement rejecting GM wheat, and our company also does not handle GM wheat."

Question 1: Do you know about genetically modified (GM) food?

YES 9

NO 0

Question 2: In May 2009, 10 wheat-related associations, including the American, Australian and Western Canadian wheat associations, announced that they request commercial cultivation of GM wheat as soon as possible. Did you know about this?

YES 7

NO 2

Question 3: Presently, there is no GM wheat on the market, but should it happen in the future, and it is sold [in Japan], do you think GM labelling will be necessary?

YES 8

NO 1

Question 4: In the future, should GM wheat become commercially available, will your company import it?

Yes, we want to import it 0

No, we do not want to import it 2

It depends on the demands of the [Japanese] consumers (5 companies)

It depends on the attitudes of the flour industry as a whole (1 company)

Question 5: Are you aware of the cross-contamination and environmental pollution which can be expected in case GM wheat is cultivated?

YES 7

NO 2

Discussion:

The No! GMO Campaign has compared the results of this questionnaire in December, 2009 to our previous one in March, 2004. At that time, we sent the questionnaire to 15 companies, and received replies from 7 different companies. In 2004, all 7 replied that GM wheat should be labelled. 5 out of 7 stated that they did not want to import GM wheat, while this time, not a single company replied that they would like to import GM wheat. We are concerned about the fact that several companies stated that they do not know about the risks associated with GM wheat.

We also received a letter from the person in charge at Japan's Flour Millers Association. He noted that the answer to questions 1 and 2 is yes, and that in response to question 3, the most important issue is to "obey the law." As for question 5, he noted: "We have to expect that cross-contamination of GM crops will happen."

Also, he noted: "Under the present circumstances, with all the doubts about safety and the environment that the consumers in Japan have, including the effect on the human body from GM foods, GM wheat is included among the items that are not acceptable for the Japanese market. We believe that it will be difficult to know if the wheat flour and products are made with GM wheat or not, but such products would have to be clearly labelled."

Wheat is something that is essential for our daily sustenance, just like rice. Together with citizen groups and consumer organizations from around the world, we will continue to carefully monitor the misguided attempts to introduce GM wheat.

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World Social Forum: Another World Is Possible

10 years have passed since the failed World Trade Organization meeting in Seattle. Soon after that, activists and experts, along with the many representatives of different non-governmental organizations that had participated in Seattle, both in the demonstrations and inside the conference halls, created the World Social Forum. This was an effort to change the debate from “anti-WTO” or “anti-globalization” to discuss how to create a way forward towards a more fair global order.

On Sunday, January 24, 2009, the forum meets in Tokyo under the theme of Another World is Possible. Yasuaki Yamaura from Consumers Union of Japan will participate as facilitator. Update: Read Yamaura-san’s report!

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Tokyo Metropolitan World Social Forum 2010

300 people participated in the World Social Forum in Tokyo, Japan on January 24, 2010. The event was held as prominent figures in politics and business met for the World Economic Forum in Davos. Similar protest events were held around the world. In Tokyo, we held 12 subcommittee meetings, and a photography exhibition with World Social Forum around the world as a theme. There was also a music performance by Amami folk singers from Kagoshima Prefecture, called Maburi Spirit.

This year marked the tenth anniversary of World Social Forum, which held its first meeting in 2001. Kenji Agou from Seinan Gakuin University traced the development of the WSF from the protests against capitalism in the 1970s to the crisis of consumption and investment, with “neo-liberalism” emerging as a tool for deregulation and globalization in the 1990s. He pointed out that this has directly caused poverty and increased the income gap between the rich and poor on a global scale. The collapse of the neo-liberal world order came around 2007 with the subprime loan crisis in the United States. We are now seeing a rise in the position of developing countries and more power to the G20 members, as no single country can claim to be world leader.

There are no simple solutions for the current global crisis, but the new social movement such as WSF can at least be a way to confront neo-liberalism and provide alternatives to the crisis of the economic and financial world.

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In Tokyo, the subcommittee meetings held discussions about a range of topics including labour issues, poverty reduction, gender inequality, climate change, finance, military affairs, and media. Here, let me focus on the keynote speech by Keisuke Amagasa of the Citizens Biotechnology Information Center, who led the subcommittee on biological diversity and its importance for food safety. He noted that a few large biotech companies such as Monsanto Co. are trying to take control over the world's agricultural seeds. This has led to pollution and contamination problems wherever genetically modified foods have been introduced. He warned that when independent testing of GM crops has been done, safety issues have emerged. There are also serious concerns about the effect on biodiversity if GM crops are introduced. In reaction to this, farmers and citizens have joined forces in a strong call to the negotiators who will meet in Nagoya in October 2010 to act positively on the global agreement to protect biological diversity and carefully study rice paddy diversity and the abundance of living organisms that are coexisting with rice farms.

In the subcommittee meeting called "Searching for another way – food and agriculture" Tousaburou Sato discussed the problem of poverty in farm villages in rural Japan. The 74-year old farmer and writer talked about his childhood memories, when he was a young student at a local "Yamabiko School." While there was not enough rice to eat, everyone supported each other in the regional society. These days, people take food for granted, but conditions for those who are making a living in the rural areas have not improved. Last year, SDP promised new reforms for farmers as it is almost impossible to survive unless one also does other jobs, and the average age of Japan's farmers is very high.

Other speakers pointed out that the solitude and loneliness of senior citizens in rural Japan should not be forgotten. They hope that people living in farm villages and cities will join forces to tackle the problems.

It became clear during this event that the World Social Forum movement must deal with the entire set of problems caused by neo-liberalism and globalization, including poverty, income gaps, and peace/military issues. It is my hope that we will see more WSF events in many locations around the world in the future.

Yasuaki Yamaura

Article first published in Consumers Report No 1456 (in Japanese)

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World Social Forum: Challenging The Economic Order

CUJ and other NGOs including Attac Japan, People's Plan and Space Allies/Allies Law Office are preparing for the World Social Forum 2010 to be held on January 24, 2010 in Tokyo and on March 21, 2010 in Osaka.

Before that, on November 23, 2009, a meeting will be held to discuss how we can challenge Davos and the economic order promoted by global leaders, who created the current financial crisis. Speakers include Christophe Augiton from France and Chico Whitaker from Brazil.

It is the first time in 10 years we have an opportunity to invite two of the founders and main actors of the WSF movement. What is World Social Forum and what does it mean for you and your future? Come and participate on Monday, which is Labour Day holiday in Japan!

In Memory of Urano Hisako

Mizuhara Hiroko writes:

Ms. Urano Hisako, who supported the international activities over the past 20 years at Consumers Union of Japan, has passed away on 2009 December 14. She was only 60 year old. I first met Urano-san as Consumers Union of Japan planned its 20th anniversary in August 1989: When we started the work to prepare for the large Asian Pacific Consumers' Conference (APCC) held in Omiya, Japan, she began working as a volunteer at our office.

Urano-san, together with almost 50 other volunteers who were fluent in English, contributed to the success of the APCC, coordinating this large meeting as we welcomed 20 guests from countries in the Asia-Pacific region.

Urano-san took a great interest in the consumer perspective. She made it possible for Consumers Union of Japan to get involved with PAN AP, the Pesticide Action Network and IBFAN, the International Breast Feeding Action Network, that began cooperating with CUJ during the 1990s. Over the past 20 years, Urano-san continued helping other international solidarity networks.

In particular, it was Urano-san who made Japan Resource, our international newsletter, what it is today. Japan Resources compiles news about our activities in Japan and abroad in English. With earnest and joyful efforts, she greatly expanded CUJ's international cooperation and communication with many specialists and activists in other countries through Japan Resources.

She also led the coordination of CUJ's work together with Consumers International, the London-based federation of consumer organizations around the world, especially in the Asia-Pacific region.

Thanks to Urano-san, we now have several people at our office who are fluent in both English and Japanese. They are making every effort to continue publishing Japan Resources on the Internet and to take over many of her other tasks.

Dear Urano-san, we would like to thank you for everything you did. We will never forget you.

Mizuhara Hiroko

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GM Rice And Contamination Cases Worry Consumers In Japan

Japanese consumers are strongly opposed to genetically modified foods, according to several large opinion polls. The news that China has approved GM rice was thus a surprise for everyone who cares about health and the environment. China currently does not export much rice, but Japanese food companies are increasingly setting up factories to produce frozen foods like the gyoza dumplings that were in the news in 2008, when packages with contaminated products were found in Japanese supermarkets.. Unapproved GM rice that was grown illegally in China was also found in Europe in 2006, and in Heinz baby food products sold in China and Hong Kong.

In January 2007, the unauthorized GM rice, a strain called Bt 63 was found in a number of products imported to Japan. Then in May 2007, tests on a cargo of harusame (rice noodles) made by Guangdong Dongguan Jinying Rice Stick Factory of China turned out positive for illegal GM rice. Two other violations involved mochi (sticky rice flower products) from two other Chinese manufacturers.

“We don’t believe the Chinese authorities have the capacity to check carefully if the GM rice is safe or not, “ says Amagasa Keisuke at the Tokyo-based No! GMO Campaign. “They also don’t seem to have the capacity to keep illegal GM seeds away from commercial farmers, and we are worried that this will have a huge impact on Japan.”

The GM rice approved in China in late 2009 is a variety that contain Bt proteins from the *Bacillus thuringiensis* bacterium to protect them against the rice stem borer, according to media reports. The director of the Center for Chinese Agricultural Policy of the Chinese Academy of Sciences in Beijing says to *New Scientist* that he expects production of GM rice to occur in 2011 in Hubei province, but the novel strains now need to undergo registration and production trials before commercial production can be approved in restricted areas, which may take up to 2-3 years.

The rice stem borer is not much of a problem if normal farming practices are applied. Using genetic engineering to deal with such insects is not necessary. Rather, GM crops have been found to lead to the emergence of Bt resistance among insects, a problem that farmers growing BT crops have already experienced. Genetically modified Bt crops have been found to harm Monarch butterflies, and Bt resistant bollworms have also been found in plantations where genetically modified cotton is grown in the United States, according to research at University of Arizona. Japan has not approved genetically modified rice and consumers and farmers have repeatedly rejected field trials of GM rice in Japan.

Meanwhile, in Japan, there are reports of GM broccoli found growing wild in Tsu City in Mie prefecture, according to *Tokyo Shinbun* (Nov 21, 2009). GM broccoli is not approved in Japan, and there is every reason to believe that it has developed as a result of the import of GM canola (rape seed). Seeds from such imported varieties have been found to sprout and grow at harbours, along roads, and near food oil factories in many places around Japan. Roundup Ready and Bt canola have been found and destroyed by local activists from consumer groups, Seikatsu Club and the No! GMO Campaign near harbours in Kobe, Nagoya, Chiba, Ibaraki, and elsewhere.



Photo: Activists have gathered near ports and food oil factories on a number of occasions since 2004 to pick and test canola growing wild in Japan. The import of genetically modified canola from Canada has led to wide-spread contamination.

Both canola and broccoli are closely related plants, which are members of the brassica family. It is a wake-up call that illegal varieties of GM crops can find their way to cross-breed and cause contamination unless the imports are stopped. Other food crops that are related to canola are Hakusai (white cabbage) and Komatsuna (leafy Japanese spinach mustard), varieties that are commonly grown and eaten in Japan.

This case shows that introducing GM crops can lead to the development of invasive species that may cause unexpected and unintended harm to a local ecosystem.



Photo: Kawata Masahara shows a GM broccoli plant found growing wild in Japan in October, 2009. No such plant has been released from laboratories and it has not been approved for cultivation.

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New GMO Food Additives To Be Introduced Without Full Safety Appraisal

Labelled only as “amino acid and others”

On September 14, 2009, two new food additives from Ajinomoto were judged to be “safe” by the Expert Committee for Genetically Modified Food and Others at the Food Safety Commission (FSC). The appraisal was open for public comments and it seems likely that the two novel amino acid products will be approved by the Ministry of Health, Welfare and Labour by the end of November.

So far, several GMO food additives have been approved, but they were basically used for food processing, as in the case of enzymes like alpha amylase for improved productivity. There have been no cases of GMO food additives that are used directly as seasoning as is the case of amino acids. Thus, when Ajinomoto first submitted these GMO products, there was no established method for safety appraisal.

That was why the Food Safety Commission has published a “Directive for safety assessment of food additives which are produced using genetically modified micro-organisms and which are highly refined and have non-protein characteristics, including amino acids.” (Many studies have verified that the process of genetic engineering can produce unpredicted toxins or allergens.)

The two GMO food additives FSC Expert Committee judged as safe are L-Glutamic Acid Sodium (GLU-No. 2 strain) and Aspartame-L-Phenylalanine (PHA-No. 2 strain). In the current food-labelling legislation, the former would be labelled only as “amino acid, and others” and would be used as a food additive in many foods. The latter would be labelled only as Aspartame which is classified as an artificial sweetener. None of these will need to be labelled as GMO or otherwise identified as genetically modified under the current rules.

For what purpose is genetic engineering used in the production of these chemicals?

In the human gut, there are a number of different bacteria, including E Coli. These help to digest the protein we eat, be it fish or meat or other sources, by breaking them down to amino acids, making it possible for the body to absorb them from the intestine. At Ajinomoto Co., Inc. they figured out how to make use of this mechanism, using artificially cultured bacteria in large tanks. Presumably, by using GMO bacteria, they claim they can increase the productivity of the bacteria.

However, for all of those who are thinking about food, this latest development for the purpose of “improving” production cannot be regarded as safe. Was there something wrong with the former production methods?

We remember the “tryptophan affair” when many people fell ill and some died due to the production methods, at a time when tryptophan was sold as a supplement. L-Tryptophan is also an amino acid that can be produced using bacteria.

This incident was caused by Showa Denko Co. in 1988 and 1989 and most victims were Americans. 38 people died and more than 6,000 people fell ill. The cause was identified as several impurities, which were found only in the product made by Showa Denko. The harmful impurities had begun to appear when genetic engineering was introduced in the production process, and they had not been eliminated from the final mixture. It was shown that this was possibly the reason the final product had become so harmful to humans.

It is clear that consumers will be paying a high price for the lack of thorough examination of how and why the tryptophan incident happened. Before GMO food additives are approved, their safety must be carefully appraised. At the moment, the Food Safety Commission has not been able to convince us that this is the case.

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Japan Resources is published by Consumers Union of Japan (CUJ). CUJ was founded in April 1969 and was officially certified as a non-profit organization on May 1, 2006 by the new Japanese NPO legislation. We continue to be a non-political and financially independent organization (NGO). CUJ is funded by membership fees and donations. The main concern of CUJ and its members is to realize a world of liberty and equality, a world free of economic, social and legal discrimination, and to preserve a safe and healthy environment for our children's future.

CUJ pursues the following goals on behalf of consumers: (1) To secure for ourselves and our families safe and healthy lives, (2) to establish systems/laws to protect the rights of consumers, (3) to promote peace, social justice and economic fairness, (4) to support and empower consumers who care about the environment, and (5) to cooperate with foreign consumer groups/organizations.

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