

Final Analysis Recommends Deregulation of GE bentgrass

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ONTARIO, Ore. — The Center for Food Safety has blasted a final Environmental Impact Statement that recommends deregulation of a genetically engineered creeping bentgrass that escaped field trials in 2003 and has taken root in Jefferson and Malheur counties in Oregon.

It was being developed by Scotts Miracle-Gro Co. and Monsanto Corp. for use mainly on golf courses. Since the escapes, Scotts has been responsible for controlling and eradicating it where possible.

Scotts and Monsanto in 2015 petitioned USDA to deregulate the bentgrass, which was genetically engineered to withstand applications of glyphosate, the active ingredient in Monsanto's popular Roundup weed killer.

A final EIS released by USDA Dec. 7 recommends deregulation of the genetically engineered creeping bentgrass because it "is unlikely to pose a plant pest risk...."

Some farmers and water managers in the affected counties worry that because the bentgrass is resistant to glyphosate and difficult to kill, it could clog irrigation ditches and affect shipments of hay and other crops to nations that don't accept traces of genetically modified organisms.

The Center for Food Safety criticized the final EIS, saying it will result in USDA relinquishing all authority over the GE grass and lay the burden for controlling it on farmers and other landowners.

"USDA's approval of this genetically engineered grass is as dangerous as it is unlawful," CFS Senior Attorney George Kimbrell said in a news release. "The agency is giving Monsanto and Scotts a free pass for the harm their product has already caused farmers and the environment, and is irresponsibly gambling future harm on nothing more than their empty promises."

Sid Abel, assistant deputy administrator of USDA's Biotechnology Regulatory Services, said a final decision has not been made on the petition for deregulation. A 30-day public viewing period [ending January 9, 2017] follows release of the EIS and a final determination by the Secretary of Agriculture won't be made until that time has passed.

He said it is incorrect to state that commercial approval of the bentgrass has been granted, as is stated in the CFS news release.

"That is an incorrect statement," Abel said. "This process has not been completed."

CFS's Kimbrell said it's a technicality to say a final decision hasn't been made.

"It's called a final EIS because it's final," he said. "For all intents and purposes, the decision was made yesterday. That's not going to change."

Scotts reached a 10-year agreement with USDA in September 2015 that critics say allows the company to essentially walk away from any responsibility for controlling the plant in a few years.

As part of the agreement, Scotts and Monsanto agreed not to commercialize or further propagate the plant in the future.

Farmer Jerry Erstrom, chairman of the Malheur County Weed Board and one of the most vocal critics of the agreement, said deregulation of the creeping bentgrass will shift the onus for controlling it from Scotts to landowners.

“This smells so bad,” he said about the final EIS. “They just dumped it all on the landowner.”

Both Scotts and USDA officials have told Capital Press the 10-year agreement does not allow the company to walk away from its responsibility, and USDA's Abel said deregulation of the plant would have no impact on the agreement.



Sean Ellis/Capital Press A genetically engineered creeping bentgrass plant is shown Oct. 10 during an outreach meeting in Ontario, Ore. Scotts Miracle-Gro Co. experts showed farmers and others how to identify the plant.

<http://www.capitalpress.com/Oregon/20161208/final-analysis-recommends-deregulation-of-genetically-engineered-bentgrass>