

Irish cook whisks up opposition to Monsanto's sugar

Dorina Allen, Ireland's most famous TV cook, has added her voice to the protests against plans to expand trials in the Irish Republic involving sugar beet genetically modified to be resistant to Monsanto's (St Louis, MO) herbicide, Roundup. Five new trials of the crop are planned, and the Irish Environmental Protection Agency (EPA; Johnston Castle) must decide by the end of April whether they can proceed.

Allen, whose name is synonymous with the best of Irish food, is head of the internationally known Ballymaloe Cookery School, which attracts students from around the world. She announced her concerns at the beginning of March after finding out about Monsanto's plan for a trial at a farm in Shanagarry, County Cork, just a mile from the cookery school. "[I am] terribly worried about the speed with which these trials are being pursued," says Allen, who grows her own organic meat and vegetables. "[N]ot enough is known about the whole process and the repercussions of fiddling around with genes, especially the impact on the food chain."

The controversy started last year after Monsanto began a single trial that took place on a government research farm in County Carlow, 40 miles from Dublin. The Irish courts gave the go-ahead for the trial following legal challenges from protesters. However, in November, a group of environmental activists calling themselves the Gaelic Earth Liberation Front broke into the farm and destroyed the crop (*Nature Biotechnology* 15:1229, 1997).

Monsanto called in the Irish police to investigate what it termed "the wanton damage," and has refused to be intimidated. The company, which subsequently submitted plans for ten more trials (including the one at Shanagarry), asked the EPA to consider keeping the location secret in light of the earlier sabotage. When the EPA refused to do this, several farmers withdrew from the trials, forcing Monsanto to scale down the project. The company currently has applications filed for permission to conduct genetically modified sugar beet trials at five different sites across the country, in Counties Cork, Meath, and Wexford.

Anthony Garvey is a freelance writer working in Dublin, Ireland.

Some support for the trials comes from the Irish Farmers Association trade union in Dublin, which has backed its members who are taking part in the trials, saying they are entitled to participate. A number of prominent Irish scientists have also supported the safety aspects of the trials.

However, Monsanto's opponents are pressing for a moratorium on all genetically modified crops until research can show definitely no adverse long-term impact on both the human food chain and the environment. Monsanto faces opposition from such environmental groups as the Green Party, as well as consumer organizations, the organic food industry, some trade union leaders, and a new lobby group called Genetic Concern (Dublin). An Irish Green Party member of the European Parliament (Strasbourg, France), Patricia McKenna, who represents the Dublin constituency, raised eyebrows by suggesting that those responsible for the

November sabotage "should be congratulated." The trials also are opposed by at least half a dozen members of the Irish parliament—a small group of Greens and independents who, significantly, could hold the balance of power in the parliament. Furthermore, the senior party in Ireland's current ruling coalition, Fianna Fail, is essentially against genetically modified crops. Last year, its environmental spokesman asserted that the party, given an opportunity, would make Ireland a "genetic engineering-free zone." The Gaelic Earth Liberation Front has added its own sinister note by warning of "further action" if trials continue.

So far, almost 4000 objections to the trials have been lodged with the EPA, which must decide on the Monsanto application by the end of April. It authorized the earlier trial following a lengthy public hearing, but, according to Genetic Concern, exceeded its power in doing so. The group appealed the decision, and a test case is due before the Irish High Court, probably before the end of June this year.

Dorina Allen is a significant addition to the anti-Monsanto forces. As a best-selling cookery writer and broadcaster, she is the country's unofficial ambassador for Irish food. A 26-week series on the Ballymaloe Cookery School and gardens recently started on British TV, featuring Allen's organic food

suppliers. Plus, as a member of the Irish Food Safety Authority (Dublin), her warning about the trials carries considerable weight. However, Allen emphasizes that she is making her criticisms not as a board member, but "as a consumer and a mother of four children." She accepts the need for large-scale food manufacture but warns, "We are pushing animals and plants beyond their natural limit. You cannot mess with nature and expect to get away with it indefinitely."

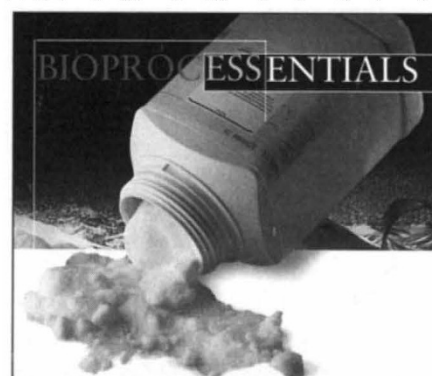
In addition, Allen criticizes "the deplorably inadequate labeling arrangements" for genetically modified products introduced into Europe from the United States. The animals on her farm can no longer be given soya feed, she complains, because it has become impossible to separate genetically engineered soya from nonmodified soya.

Monsanto, recognizing the impact of Allen's broadside on the debate, has asked to meet her to explain their case. She has replied to a letter from the company's Irish business manager, Patrick O'Reilly, agreeing to a meeting, but stipulating that it be held at her cookery school.

Anthony Garvey

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"You cannot mess with nature and expect to get away with it," warns Dorina Allen.



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