

Fears of GM Crop Invasion in Kyrgyzstan

Author: [IWPR Central Asia](#)

Unregulated imports of genetically modified seeds and foods raise concerns about public health and biodiversity.

Kyrgyz environmentalists are worried by the unrestricted import of genetically modified products and are urging the government to come up with robust policies.

They say that while the rest of the world hotly debates the benefits and risks of genetically modified, GM, crops, the Kyrgyz authorities have said and done nothing.

The authorities did in fact address the issue in the summer of 2006, when the government produced a draft law on biodiversity which was intended to address the import and production of GM products.

But when the draft went to parliament, deputies returned it in January 2007, saying it needed improvement.

Gennady Vorobyev, a genetic engineering expert who was one of those who drafted the bill, said the failure to pass it left a legal black hole.

“All the provisions needed to regulate the import of goods containing GM components were detailed in our draft law,” he said. “Since parliament has returned it for revision, there is now no legislative foundation and consequently no systematic state control over genetically modified imports.”

Genetic modification began being widely used in agriculture in the mid-Nineties, and ever since then scientists have argued passionately over its merits and pitfalls.

Supporters argue that the creation of disease- or bug-resistant crop varieties can greatly increase harvests, potentially cutting poverty and hunger in some of the world’s poorest countries.

They also insist the new GM food varieties are totally harmless to humans.

Their opponents disagree vehemently, fearing that GM strains could disrupt human immune systems and create allergic reactions and other disorders.

In addition, they worry that GM strains will harm the environment through a kind of “genetic pollution” effect.

Professor Yrysbek Abdurasulov, an agricultural specialist, is among those who are deeply concerned.

He complains that significant numbers of GM seeds have been imported from the United States, Holland, Germany, China and elsewhere without any monitoring of their effects. They include varieties of watermelon, cabbage, tomato, pepper, cucumber, potato and sugar beet.

Kalia Moldogazieva, who heads the non-government group Tree of Life, is equally disturbed at the trend.

“As an ecologist, I oppose the import of GM products into Kyrgyzstan, in particular those that can affect agriculture and hence the ecology of the whole country,” she said. “We have our own traditional, ecologically safe methods of crop selection and reproduction which can and should be used.”

Sceptics say there has been insufficient study of the long-term consequences and potential impact of new, artificially manipulated varieties.

Topping the list of concerns is the possible emergence of mutant organisms containing unpredictable features, and of more dangerous virus strains.

Genetic modification is big business. The biggest producers are the US, Japan, Germany, France, China and India. According to some estimates, annual sales of GM products are worth 20 billion US dollars a year.

However, production volumes are still relatively small, accounting for only one per cent of total food products consumed worldwide every year.

But the rate at which the GM industry is accelerating, coupled with the failure of Kyrgyz officials to respond in the face of pressure to import more, alarms local environmentalists.

Vorobyev insists bill developed by his group would have addressed almost all the concerns about how to ensure such products are imported only if it is safe to do so.

“As Kyrgyzstan is a member of the World Trade Organisation, it cannot ban imports of items, including those containing GM-components. If it did, it would face fines running into the billions,” said Vorobyev.

“So we developed mechanisms where the only GM products that could be imported would be those that could not be reproduced. Kyrgyzstan would have been able to ban self-reproducing products such as seeds and seedlings on the grounds that they threatened the country’s biological diversity.”

Kyrgyzstan should also be able to restrict certain GM imports under the 2003 Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety, which it has signed. This agreement entitles developing economies like Kyrgyzstan, in the absence of domestic regulatory frameworks, to make any decisions on GM imports subject to an assessment of the risks.

However, environmentalists in Kyrgyzstan complain that this mechanism is lying dormant as no one in government has explored its possibilities.

Official neglect of the GM issue has fuelled popular fears about the threats people might face from GM products.

Some farmers also fear that an unrestricted invasion of cheaper GM foodstuffs will price them out of the market. They say their old-fashioned varieties of fruit and vegetables will not be able to compete against blemish-free, longer-lasting GM imports.

Kyrgyzstan remains a rural country in which about 60 per cent of the population of five million still makes a livelihood from agriculture.

Akim Moldokulov, a farmer with a medium-sized landholding, says mass import of genetically modified apples from China has hit local producers hard.

“Our apples cost less than the imported ones and are ecologically pure, but the Chinese apples look better to the consumer,” he explained. “Most people don’t know anything about GM and they buy those imported apples even though they’re more expensive.”

The manager of a food shop said that as matters stood, they could do nothing to protect local producers from this competition, as there was no law restricting sales of items containing GM components.

“When it comes to agricultural goods, suppliers only have to provide us with a quality certificate, not one identifying the presence of GM elements,” he noted.

The government’s standards agency confirmed that it tests food imports only for quality, and does not look at whether they contain GM products.

Vorobyev says this needs to change. “If we want to secure our public health and our environment, we need to design and pass an effective law regulating all the standards and mechanisms for safe imports of GM products,” he said.

“The absence of any control over GM imports could spell catastrophe for Kyrgyzstan.”

Asyl Osmonalieva is an IWPR contributor in Bishkek.

Location: [China](#)
[Kyrgyzstan](#)

Focus: [Central Asia](#)

Source URL: <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/fears-gm-crop-invasion-kyrgyzstan>