

Politics not science likely behind China's halt of crop biotech trials

Chinese officialdom appears to be at an impasse on its approach to genetically modified foods. The GMO impasse may have deeper roots than most observers realize.

It may be emblematic of a broader collision between officialdom's "modernization" strategy and a creeping distrust of authority that is undermining the communist party's reliance on "science" as a palliative that hides the fundamental flaws in the system.

The flashpoint is the Ministry of Agriculture's failure to renew "safety certificates" for three GMO crop strains in August 2014. These GMO varieties were in the advanced stages of testing, and loss of safety certificates prevents moving toward commercial release. There was no explanation for the non-action and no indication of whether approvals might be granted in the future. A Chinese scientist involved in developing the crops told a journalist it was "inconvenient" to comment on the failure to extend the certificates and said inquiries had to be made with the university's propaganda office.

An opinion piece in *Yangcheng Daily*, a Shenzhen newspaper, [questioned why the Government let the GM rice safety certificates expire without any explanation](#). According to *Yangcheng Daily*, some experts say that fear of public opinion is preventing Government officials from acting on the GMO approvals. However, the anti-GMO tide of public opinion is itself generated by the public's lack of confidence in the Government's ability to ensure food safety, said the *Yangcheng Daily* article.

The *Yangcheng* opinion writer suggests that slow approval is appropriate until there is public consensus. Pushing GM crops through without that consensus would further undermine public confidence. However, remaining silent and giving no explanation may elevate consumer fears by presuming that the Government must have evidence that GM crops are unsafe. Furthermore, said the *Yangcheng Daily*, the Government owes the public an explanation since so much has been invested in developing the crops.

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