

Will new Innate potato, with no 'foreign' DNA, satisfy anti-GMO critics?

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) in November approved for commercial planting a potato genetically engineered to have reduced bruising and browning—unsightly blemishes that lower the value of potatoes. The potato, developed by the potato giant J.R. Simplot in Boise, Idaho, is dubbed Innate as it contains only elements from sexually compatible, wild potato relatives, and employs RNA interference (RNAi) to reduce the level of several enzymes, among them one that produces the potentially carcinogenic metabolite acrylamide. This puts a new spin on the definition of a genetically modified (GM) crop, because unlike most commercialized biotech crops, it contains no foreign DNA.

Simplot is billing its potato as a more sustainable product throughout the supply chain. Growers will pay a premium for the potato seed, but their crop will have fewer blemishes, and a larger percentage of the harvest can be sold at the highest price, according to Simplot. During storage and handling, fewer potatoes will be bruised from impact and pressure, enabling companies that store and transport the potatoes to incur less waste. “We’ve done the math. Before potatoes ever reach the consumer, there is 400 million pounds of potato waste that we could save if Innate potatoes were adopted in the fresh market,” says Haven Baker, general manager and vice president of plant sciences at Simplot.

Biotech proponents hope that the lack of foreign DNA in Simplot’s potato will satisfy some arguments coming from the anti-GMO crowd. “It shifts the debate, it should be a dream of anti-GMO people because it has clear sustainability benefits,” says Jon Entine, founder and executive director of the Genetic Literacy Project.

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