

USDA lacks authority to regulate GM pine

The genetically modified variety of pine developed by ArborGen cannot be restricted by USDA, the agency has determined.

A pine tree genetically engineered for greater wood density can be grown without restrictions after the USDA decided it lacks authority to regulate the variety.

The finding has alarmed critics of genetically modified organisms who fear the new cultivar will cross-pollinate with trees in the wild, resulting in unknown consequences for forests.

ArborGen, a tree seedling producer, altered the loblolly pine variety with a “gene gun,” inserting genetic material from the Monterey pine, the American sweetgum tree, mouse ear cress and E. coli bacteria.

None of these organisms are plant pest risks, so the USDA has determined the pine is not a regulated article and can be freely cultivated without undergoing environmental studies, unlike crops that rely on plant pathogens for their transformation.

Higher density in wood is generally associated with strength and durability in lumber as well as higher energy content for biomass uses, said Steven Strauss, a forest biotechnology professor at Oregon State University.

While the USDA may not consider such crops to be regulated articles, other countries may disagree — creating the potential for “chaos in the marketplace,” he said.

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