

GMO breakthrough: Philippines becomes first country to approve nutrition-enhanced Golden Rice for commercial sale; Bangladesh next

The Philippines became the world's first country [July 23] to approve the commercial production of genetically modified "golden rice" that experts hope will combat childhood blindness and save lives in the developing world.

A biosafety permit issued by government regulators paves the way for the rice — enriched with the vitamin A precursor beta-carotene to make it more nutritional — to be grown by farmers across the country, its developers said.

"It's a really significant step for our project because it means that we are past this regulatory phase and golden rice will be declared as safe as ordinary rice," [said] Russell Reinke of the Philippine-based International Rice Research Institute (IRRI).

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World Health Organization data show vitamin A deficiency causes up to 500,000 cases of childhood blindness every year, with half of those dying within 12 months of losing their sight.

Nearly 17 percent of children under the age of five in the Philippines are deficient in vitamin A, according to IRRI.

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Golden rice was analysed by food safety regulators in Australia, the United States and Canada and was given the thumbs up, he said, but it has not been approved in these countries for commercial production.

It is also being reviewed by regulators in Bangladesh.

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