

Viewpoint: Greenpeace continues campaign to scuttle Philippines' vitamin A-enriched Golden Rice approval, but government holds firm

COVID-19 has caused untold suffering throughout the world, but particularly in developing countries. So why is Greenpeace continuing a yearslong campaign against a food product that could deliver dramatic health benefits to children in some of the poorest parts of the world?

That's the question we've been asked several times since the group recently announced its opposition to a decision by regulators in the Philippines to approve a permit for farmers to grow a breed of rice that's fortified with vitamin A. The battle is emblematic of the way in which baseless fears about technology are used as a cudgel to deny people — most of them poor — opportunities to realize better health and higher living standards.

More than 140 million children throughout the world experience vitamin A deficiency. The result is blindness for as many as 500,000 of these children each year, while countless others are afflicted with measles, severe diarrhea, and stunting. A lack of vitamin A is also a threat for millions of pregnant women, potentially causing night blindness and other maladies. Families in the countries where vitamin A deficiency is greatest have minimal access to foods that could otherwise supply it, such as carrots and spinach.



Credit: My Joy Online

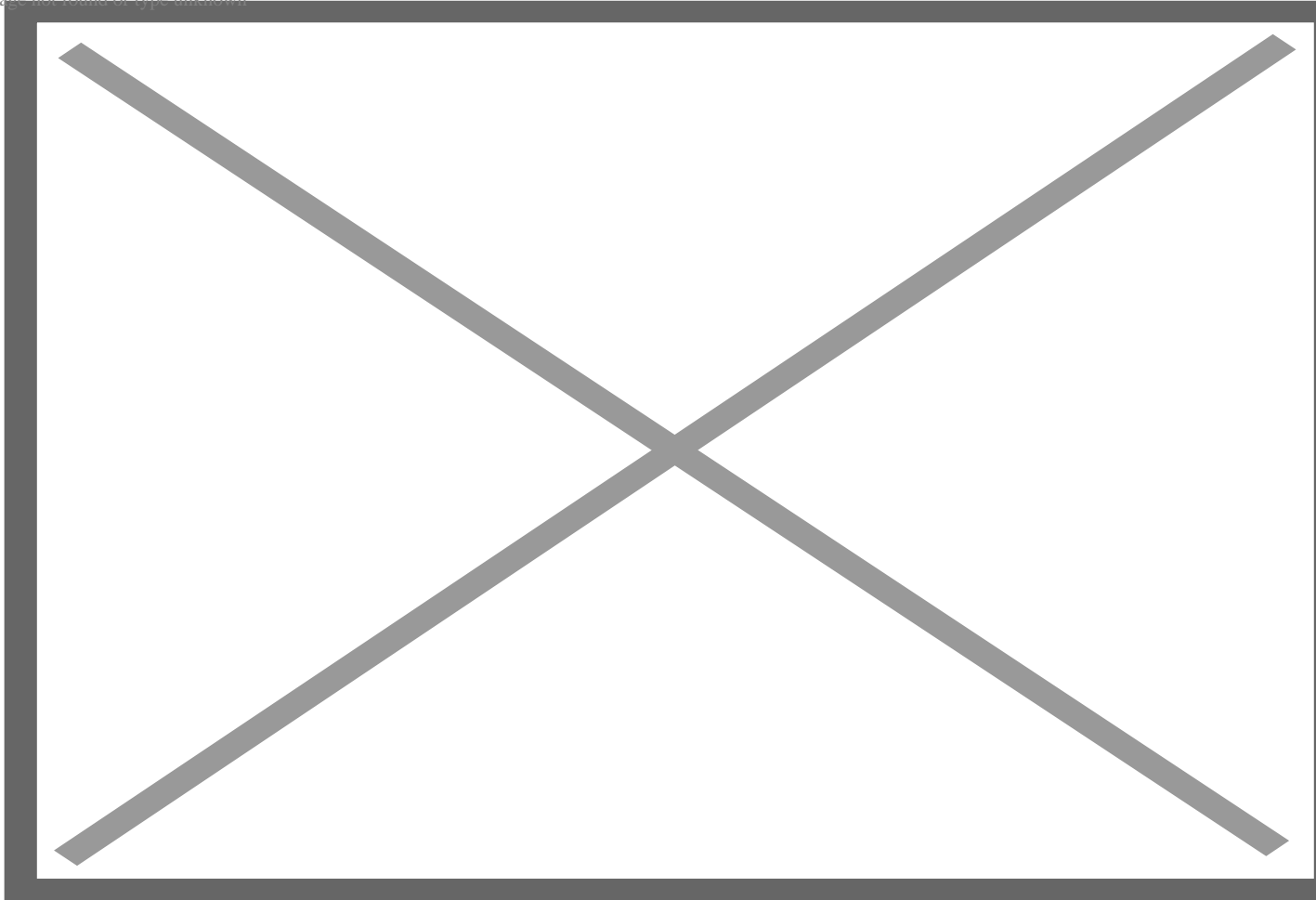
Vitamin A deficiency was first identified two centuries ago, and despite concerted efforts, including the use of supplementation and vitamin A capsules, vitamin A deficiency has remained prevalent. In the 1990s, German plant scientists began searching for a simpler and more sustainable solution.

With funding from entities such as the Rockefeller Foundation and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, they developed a form of rice that is identical to conventional rice other than the inclusion of two genes that enable the crop to naturally produce beta-carotene, a compound that gives color to plant products and that the human body converts into vitamin A. This modification, along with natural yellow pigments known as carotenoids, gives the rice kernels a tint that has led the product to become known as “golden rice.”

In most developing countries, especially throughout Asia, rice is a dietary staple, which makes golden rice ideal for delivering vitamin A, particularly since one serving can include all or nearly all the vitamin A preschool children need in a day. But because golden rice is designated a “genetically modified organism,” it has been opposed by Greenpeace and other groups that share its anachronistic thinking about farming and technology.

The effect has been to stir up fears about golden rice (and many other GMOs) that have no basis in science. More than 150 Nobel laureates have signed a letter condemning the anti GMO scare campaign and calling for golden rice to be approved. The signers note that Greenpeace has claimed that “Golden Rice would not deliver enough vitamin A to be effective, or that it would produce so much as to be dangerous. All these claims are false.”

Image not found or type unknown



Credit: Greenpeace

The safety of golden rice has been attested to by regulators in the U.S., Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. Moreover, two of the crops produced in the highest volume in the U.S. (soy and corn) are mostly GMOs, and millions of Americans have been consuming these products for decades.

As longtime supporters of philanthropic efforts to modernize agriculture in developing countries, we have been dismayed by the militancy of the anti-GMO brigades. They have vandalized GMO research projects and even uprooted golden rice that had been planted as part of field trials in 2013 in the Philippines.

Thankfully, science has prevailed in the Philippines, where regulators issued a biosafety permit for planting the crop. But even with the new approval, it's likely to be several years before golden rice is widely available for consumption since it takes a few planting seasons to build adequate quantities of seeds.

People throughout the developing world, children in particular, should not continue to go without a life-enhancing product because of a narrow-minded ideological crusade that's rooted in hostility to science. In the face of this strident opposition, the approval in the Philippines is remarkable, and it serves as a strong model for policymakers in other countries who may also want their populations to benefit from the delivery of enhanced nutrition in their staple food.

Phil Harvey is the founder of the DKT Liberty Project, a nonprofit organization that has provided financial support for communications efforts linked to the International Rice Research Institute, which developed Golden Rice. AC Bushnell is the international program director of the DKT Liberty Project.

A version of this article was originally posted at the [Washington Examiner](#) and is reposted here with permission. The Washington Examiner can be found on Twitter [@dcexaminer](#)