Japan Requires GM Food Safety Tests

Dancing a foxtrot on a tight rope with two partners simultaneously is a precarious feat. Bruised egos and sore toes would surface sooner or later. Even as Japan tries to keep the delicate balance between the US and the consumers at home, attempting not to risk the ire of one over the other, it is inevitable that Japan treads on sensitive toes.

Looking at recent developments, it does seem as though the government prefers to humor the consumers (and the subsequent profits) rather than the belligerent US. Consumers in Japan had kicked up a hullabaloo, advocating that genetically modified (GM) foods be labeled accordingly. Meanwhile, in July, Reuters reported that the US warned Japan that if it implements mandatory labeling of foods containing genetically modified organisms (GMO) it could mislead consumers about food safety and disrupt trade.

Apparently, the strident protests of the consumers have been heard. The Ministry of Health and Welfare (MHW) plans to introduce a legal requirement for manufacturers of GM food products to conduct safety tests on the products, rather than allow the current laissez-faire style of testing to persist. The government hopes to alleviate growing uneasiness over products manufactured using GM ingredients by putting a more stringent system in place.

The legal requirement would kick in next fiscal year. Manufacturers would have to apply for the registration for their GM food products. Experts would then screen the products according to safety guidelines to determine whether the GM food products are harmful. Presently, MHW has registered 22 varieties of GM farm products, such as soybean and corn. Moreover, MHW prohibits GM food imports that have not passed the screening. However, because the rules were not legally binding and the decision to abide by the rules was left to the conscience of the manufacturers, there had been incidents where GM foods that failed the screening process had been imported and sold in the country. With the new legal requirement, manufacturers are legally required to recall GM foods that are found to have missed the inspection.

Taking the debate over GM foods one step further, the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries (MAFF) has announced that it would introduce mandatory labeling of at least 30 GM food products, both local and imported, when it revises the Japanese Agricultural Standards next April. Soybeans, corn or potatoes grown with gene-altering technology and processed products using them will have to be labeled as such. Under the law, the majority of foods containing plant protein, such as tofu and corn snacks will have to bear such labels.

For quite some time, the Japanese have been rather pedantic about nutritional labeling. They believe that it is important to eat foods that are chosen based on accurate knowledge about the food products and their nutritional content, hence, it is essential that the public be provided with appropriate information on the nutritional content of the food products. Thus, it is little wonder that the
Japanese consumers raised such a racket when they found out that GM foods had not been labeled as such and as a result, they have been eating GM food unknowingly.

Since April 1992, MHW has been using a set of safety evaluation guidelines for food products that involve recombinant DNA technology. These guidelines apply only if the recombinant organism itself is not eaten, and if the product is equivalent, or apparently equivalent, to an existing food product. One such example was chymosin (a milk-coagulating enzyme, used in manufacturing cheese) manufactured by culturing genetically recombinant organisms. In February 1996, based on the Food Sanitation Investigation Council’s report, MHW expanded its safety evaluation guidelines to include recombinant seed plants too.

And for now, it seemed as though Japan’s consumer organizations have scored another victory. Japanese companies are beginning to acknowledge consumer needs over business profits. A telling illustration of this important change is the setting up of separate sections at supermarkets, despite not being required by the government, that segregates soy products, such as tofu and sauces, made with imported GM soybeans, and those that claim to use only the local variety. Of course, heavyweight companies like Itochu Corp., which would only import GM-free soybeans and Kirin Brewery Co., which would stop using GM corns, girded the voices of the consumers. Meanwhile, other companies are also scrambling onto the bandwagon.

Yet, the government’s decision is expected to come under fire from major food exporting countries at the World Trade Organization (WTO) end of this year. Japan is believed to be the world’s biggest importer of GMOs as it is heavily dependent on agricultural imports from the US, the biggest producer of genetically altered crops.

Thailand Bans GM Crops

It was the humble cotton that stirred the hornets’ nest. Thailand’s Department of Agriculture (DOA) was deliberating whether to remove the genetically modified (GM) BT cotton — invented by transnational chemical company Monsanto — from the prohibited list under the Plant Quarantine Act when academics, consumer associations, non-governmental organizations decried the proposed move. If BT cotton were deregulated, it would be the first transgenic plant to be released for commercial purposes in Thailand. Yet, its detractors maintained that it should not be withdrawn from the prohibited list because it might have a negative impact on insects and the ecosystem.

After a flurry of forums and Cabinet meetings, the Thai government had decided to ban the import of GM seeds for commercial cultivation, but allow research-oriented imports. Commerce Minister Supachai Panitchpakdi, who chaired the panel from the International Economic Policy Committee, expects that the ban would continue until genetically modified organisms (GMOs) are proven to be scientifically safe. The DOA is in charge of preventing the smuggling of GMOs by applying the 1964 Plant Quarantine Act which bans the import of 40 GMO items, including maize and soybeans.

While a clear policy for GM crops has been drawn up, the policy pertaining to processed food products that contain GMOs remains largely unclear. And the confusion deepened when the government said it was open to GM imports for production as animal feed or processing as finished foods such as cooking oil or snacks, in response to the food processing and feedmill industry’s request. This came in the wake of revelations that genetically...
modified soybean and corn have been imported for the past five years in violation of the Plant Quarantine Act with the full knowledge of officials who did not strictly enforce the law for fear of jeopardizing the food industry.

Moreover, according to Dr. Jakkrit Kuanpoth of Sukhothaihammathirat Open University’s Faculty of Law, the recently announced government policy on the import of genetically modified commodities violates the 1964 Plant Quarantine Act. A specialist in GMOs, he said that by allowing a certain amount of modified seeds into the country, the government was creating a loophole in the amended act. He suggested that it would be better if the government adopted a policy that enforced a blanket ban on the import of modified seeds.

Another import-related problem, he said, was the legal definition of the word “seed” as there was no clear distinction between seed and grain. “Seed used for planting for commercial reasons is banned while grain used as a raw material in industry remains in the ‘unclear policy’ category. So where do we stand on this point, grain or seed, legal or illegal? It’s very confusing,” he said to The Nation.

Indeed, the lack of a concrete stance on the government’s part is not only affecting imports, it is also affecting the exports sector. In early October, the Agriculture Ministry announced that it plans to inspect and provide labels to guarantee exported products are not GMOs. Suthiphan Iriphan, the deputy permanent secretary of the Agriculture Ministry, had said that the ministry would establish an inspection laboratory for exported agricultural products.

However, within the same month, the government changed tune and adopted a neutral policy towards the GMO issue by not setting regulations forcing exporters to label commodities unless either the companies or countries importing the products required it. Deputy Prime Minister Supachai Panitchpakdi said after the meeting of the International Economics Relations Committee that labeling would be on a case-by-case basis. An absence of global regulations aside, Thailand decided not to set its own rules on GMOs because of the expensive costs stemming from the inspection and labeling process.

According to the deputy commerce minister, Goonpat Asvirivichit, the inspection and labeling process of goods would increase costs by up to 30 percent. In addition, Vichan Kruanngarm, the Cabinet secretary-general, said that it would take Thailand up to two years to develop technology to prepare for the genetic modification issue, including inspection and certificate issuance to prove whether commodities were free of GMOs.

Currently, many European countries ban the import of goods containing GMOs, while others demand that imports be labeled to indicate whether or not they contain modified products. Meanwhile, two shipments of Thai products exported to European countries have been rejected in the past year since the concern over modified goods became a global issue.

In America, many farmers are about to harvest GM corn and soybeans grown out of expensive seeds, but their foreign buyers are saying they do not want the crops. And Thailand, being one of the world’s net food-exporters, should set clear policies on GMOs, GMO-free products and bio-agriculture to guarantee the access of Thai commodities to the international market. Otherwise, If Thailand is perceived to be growing gene-altered grains, Thai exports will face the same resistance as the beleaguered farmers in the US.

For now, labeling would be introduced on a voluntary basis for businesses wanting to make sure their products are GMO-free and also to avoid trade barriers from foreign importers. As for the export of GMOs, buyers can coordinate directly with Thai exporters if they need certification or any specific labels from the latter. The private certification will be done on a voluntary basis.

At the end of the day, the question is not whether GMO products are good or bad. More fundamentally, it is a question of whether Thailand is ready to accept or promote GMOs. And the academics concluded that Thailand was not ready because of the uncertainties of bio-safety and the potential danger to human health. Besides, Dr. Kaew Kangsadan-ampai, a lecturer from Mahidol University’s Faculty of Science, said that existing information and knowledge of Thailand is not enough to conclude that these GM crops are safe for the environment and public health.

Non-governmental organizations have also joined in to caution the government, urging the Agriculture Ministry to forbid the import of GMOs until at least 2003. According to Witoon Lianchamroon, a director of the BioThai group, Thailand lacked a clear policy and efficient laws for monitoring GMOs and GM food. This is evident in the current fiasco with the BT cotton.

At the moment, the laws of Thailand do not allow for commercial use of GMO products, just research under the strict control of government agencies. But in fact, cotton planted in thousands of rai in the Northeast was recently found to be contaminated with the BT cotton. The BioThai group, a leading non-governmental organization working on the biological diversity issue, discovered the strain in a GMO survey. The Science Ministry has confirmed the contamination but is unable to say where it comes from.

It is obvious from the cotton incident that Thai regulators are far from capable of controlling the use of GMO safety. Without clear guidelines and complete understanding of what GMO is all about, companies should not be allowed to develop the technology willfully. Otherwise, Thailand may one day just find itself playing Russian roulette with Mother Nature.