

GE Wheat

GE wheat discovery was reported June 14, APHIS says

By **MATTHEW WEAVER**
Capital Press

Six weeks elapsed from the time a Washington state farmer reported the discovery of glyphosate-resistant wheat plants in a fallow field and the time USDA made it public, according to a timeline the agency released.

The farmer reported to USDA on June 14 that 22

wheat plants growing in a fallow field on his property survived treatment with glyphosate, said Ed Curlett, director of public affairs for the USDA Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service.

On June 17, APHIS determined the wheat was glyphosate resistant.

On June 23, APHIS, working with the USDA Agricultural Research Service and the

Online

Farmers who suspect they have genetically engineered wheat in a field should contact the APHIS biotechnology regulatory compliance hotline: <http://bit.ly/2aAHXgY>

Grain Inspection, Packers and Stockyards Administration, confirmed the wheat was ge-

netically engineered.

After determining the wheat was genetically engineered, USDA laboratories ran specific molecular tests to determine whether MON 71800 was present, as was the case in the discoveries of GE wheat in 2013 in Oregon and 2014 in Montana, Curlett said.

After that test was negative, APHIS began testing for

different genetic “events” developed by the Monsanto Co. in the past.

On July 21, USDA confirmed the GE wheat was MON 71700, developed by Monsanto and characterized as a “sister event” to MON 71800.

“APHIS continues to research the issue to gather as much information about the incident as possible,” Curlett said.

The agency is completing the testing of the farmer’s entire harvest for the presence of GE material. So far all tests are negative. The agency is delivering tests to trading partners as quickly as possible.

Because of privacy concerns, APHIS will not reveal the farmer’s name or the location of the field, Curlett said.



Capital Press File

Wheat is shown growing in a field. South Korea has lifted the restrictions on its purchases of U.S. wheat now that the nation has a new test in place for genetically engineered wheat.

South Korea lifts its restrictions on U.S. wheat

Japan expected to follow suit by late August

By **MATTHEW WEAVER**
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South Korea has resumed normal purchases of U.S. wheat now that it has a test in place that can detect genetically engineered wheat, U.S. Wheat Associates says.

The USDA Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service is investigating 22 genetically engineered wheat plants found June 14 in a Washington state field. The wheat is MON 71700, developed by the Monsanto Co. and used in trials from 1998 to 2001 but never commercialized.

A farmer noticed the wheat after the field was sprayed with glyphosate. MON 71700 wheat is resistant to the herbicide.

South Korea was holding U.S. wheat from mills until the test, developed by Monsanto and validated by USDA, could be put in place.

The country will continue testing U.S. wheat, as it has since 2013, when a different Monsanto variety was found in an Eastern Oregon field. The new test can detect both GE varieties.

“We are very pleased that the test was available so quickly and that (the South Korea Ministry of Food and Drug Safety) deployed the test within just a few days to assure U.S. wheat remains safe

and reliable,” said Steve Mercer, vice president of communications for U.S. Wheat. “Customers in Korea may resume milling and purchasing U.S. wheat with little or no disruption, as expected.”

APHIS says there is no evidence that any genetically engineered wheat is in commercial U.S. wheat supplies. Genetically engineered wheat is not commercially available.

“We think this adds confidence in other markets that nothing has changed the U.S. wheat supply chain’s ability to deliver wheat that matches every customer’s specifications,” Mercer said.

Japan temporarily suspended purchases of Western white wheat, a blend of soft white wheat and subclass club wheat grown in the Pacific Northwest and sold to customers in Japan and Taiwan.

Japan’s Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries is customizing the test for its use. U.S. Wheat expects the test to be ready by mid- to late August.

Mercer noted that Japan has four wheat tenders in August for October delivery, which leaves room to make up any difference caused by the disruption.

Japan and South Korea rank first and fifth among the top customers for U.S. wheat overall. Japan has purchased an average of 997,000 metric tons of white wheat each year for the last five years, and South Korea has purchased an average of 679,000 metric tons per year.

GE wheat appearance a mystery, experts say

Lack of clues makes conclusions elusive, seed dealer, OSU researcher agree

By **MATTHEW WEAVER**
Capital Press

As the USDA continues its investigation into the appearance of genetically engineered wheat in Washington state, an industry official and a university researcher say too little information is available to answer the key question: How did it happen?

A farmer reported 22 glyphosate-resistant wheat plants on June 14. USDA determined that they are of Monsanto’s MON 71700 variety. Since then, agency investigators have been trying to narrow the list of possible explanations for how the wheat, which was never made commercially available, could have turned up in the fallow field.

Three years ago, Oregon State University weed scientist Carol Mallory-Smith worked on the first such incident, when a different variety, MON 71800, was found in an Eastern Oregon field.

A USDA Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service investigation was unable to pinpoint its source in that case.

More GE wheat was found in a Huntley, Mont., research field in 2014.

Mallory-Smith is not involved in the current investigation.

“They have to be picking that seed up somewhere,” Mallory-Smith said. “And that’s the big question: Where was the leak in the system?”

According to Monsanto, MON 71700 was tested in field trials in the Pacific Northwest from 1998 to 2001.

Mallory-Smith said the wheat seed could not have lay dormant 10 years in the field where it was discovered.

However, she said seed from those trials could still be viable, depending on where it was stored.

“It doesn’t last in the field for 10 years,” she said. “But seed stored properly could be 10 years old and still be viable. It’s coming from somewhere, but I don’t know where.”

Dana Herron, a member of the Washington Grain Commission and co-owner of Tri-State



Matthew Weaver/Capital Press

Dana Herron, co-owner of Tri-State Seed Co. in Connell, Wash., and a member of the Washington Grain Commission, participates in a discussion at a meeting in Spokane. Herron said he hopes a USDA investigation finds how genetically engineered wheat got into a Washington state field.



Mateusz Perkowski/Capital Press

Carol Mallory-Smith, a weed science professor at Oregon State University, says that without more information it’s impossible to determine how genetically engineered wheat got into a Washington state field.

Seed Co. in Connell, Wash., agreed.

“Seed that’s been in the soil for 15 years, there’s a very infinitesimally small chance it would be viable,” Herron said. “You’re talking about seven crop cycles and seven fallow cycles.”

Herron also said it’s not likely the discovered wheat is a mutation or has evolved somehow.

“That’s basically genetically impossible,” he said. “Somewhere along the line, there is some human involvement. I hope the investigation finds the cause, because it’s extremely disrupting to the marketplace and the confidence of our customers, which we depend on greatly.”

Some theories investigators will consider include:

- **An act of sabotage.** “If you were to put me on the spot, and I had to pick a likely

scenario, that would be the one that came to my mind first,” Herron said.

Mallory-Smith wonders what the motivation of a saboteur would be and how it would succeed.

“I don’t know how likely it would be,” Mallory-Smith said. “I don’t know what the purpose of sabotage would be. Everything would have to be perfect for somebody to even report it. The person would have to have knowledge of farming practices that particular farmer was using. There’s all kinds of things that make sabotage seem difficult, at best.”

- **Spreading by wildlife, such as geese, deer or mice.**

“In my mind, that makes no sense,” Herron said. “I don’t think there’s any evidence to substantiate that.”

- **Accidentally falling off equipment.**

Without further information from APHIS, Herron is assuming the plants in Washington were all in a smaller area in the field, similar to what happened in Eastern Oregon and Montana. The motions the wheat would have to go through make this scenario unlikely, he said.

“It’s impossible that all those seeds ran out in one little area while the guy was seeding 500 acres, or 1,000,” he said. “Rules of probability tell me this is an artificial thing.”

Herron said it’s difficult to dispel or substantiate anything without more information.

“We just don’t know the

facts,” he said. “Until we do, all we’re doing is pouring gas on a fire, and I don’t want to do that. It’s so very difficult to come to any conclusions when you don’t know all the facts.”

Mallory-Smith said she doesn’t believe that a lot of GE material is out there and unknown to the industry. There would be more complaints if it were, she said.

“Now, seed somebody has or is storing, that’s anybody’s guess,” she said. “Maybe somebody has it and doesn’t even know they have it. It doesn’t look any different. Somebody could be producing it for whatever and not actually know they have it.”

Mallory-Smith said another possibility is the seed could have been in breeding stock somewhere. How it could have been mixed into the production system is anyone’s guess, she said.

“There was a lot of testing in the environment of that wheat years ago, which makes it very difficult to follow up or investigate,” she said. “Once the gene is put into the environment, you can’t expect that it’s going to go away, that you won’t ever be able to find it again or that it would never show up again.”

That’s the case for any type of crop, not just GMOs, Mallory-Smith said.

“If it’s another crop with a specific trait, you put that trait out there, it’s not going to go away,” she said. “DNA doesn’t disappear, genes don’t disappear.”

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