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Food crisis may open door to genetically modified rice

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LOS BANOS, Philippines - Some rice-producing nations may drop their reluctance to use genetically modified (GM) seeds in the next few years to help offset a crisis that has forced millions to go hungry, a top expert said.

"If we consider the challenges that face us, I think we would be very foolish and actually irresponsible to not invest in the development of GM crops," said Robert Zeigler, director general of the International Rice Research Institute (IRRI).

"I think that governments will take a hard look and say why again are we dragging our feet in adopting GM technology,?" he told Reuters in an interview on Tuesday.

World leaders may discuss GM organisms at this week's food crisis summit in Rome but they are unlikely to be presented as part of the solution to soaring food prices amid opposition by some environmental groups to what they see as "Frankenfoods".

GM crops, which use genes from other plants and other organisms to effect special traits, are widely grown in North America and parts of South America, including cotton, a source of vegetable cooking oil, as well as corn and soybeans.

But European and Asian states have largely held off embracing GM technology for food amid skepticism about its safety.

As yet, no GM rice is grown commercially but Zeigler said that could change, at the earliest two years from now, with the world's top two producers, China and India, likely leading the charge.

"I will be very interested in seeing how China reacts over the next year. They have a transgenic insect-resistant rice that's ready for release. They have been delaying that because of pressures from the anti-GM lobby. I will be interested to see how they respond," he said.

"There are also a number of transgenic crops coming up in India. The furthest along is the eggplant. Rice is also coming along."

China and India have already adopted biotech cotton, which is engineered to resist certain insects and earlier this year, South Korea started purchasing GM corn for food.

Zeigler dismissed anti-GM groups' arguments about safety.

"We have seen no adverse effects on human health or the environment anywhere that have been demonstrated with any scientific credibility."

NO SILVER BULLET

The Philippines-based IRRI hopes to make its own GM Golden Rice, enriched with Vitamin A, available to farmers by 2011.

IRRI kick-started the so-called Green Revolution in the late 1960s with the development of high-yielding rice seeds which multiplied harvests of Asia's food staple and enabled countries such as Thailand and China to industrialize.

With international rice prices nearly tripling this year due to rising demand and export curbs by producer nations, Zeigler believes a second Green Revolution is necessary.

Nearly half the world's population depend on rice to survive and demand for the grain, which is eaten for breakfast, lunch and dinner in parts of Asia, is expected to jump 50 percent by 2030.

In addition to improving crop management, post-harvest technologies and irrigation, Zeigler also believes that GM technology is part of the solution.

He admits, however, that like others in the scientific community, he has been reluctant to sing GM's praises too loudly for fear of a backlash from anti-GM groups.

"We are all very wary of being misquoted as saying that GM is a single bullet magic solution for all the world's food ills. None of us believe that."

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