

GM PRESENCE IN ORGANIC FOOD

1. At the FSA Board open meeting on 14 June, a question was asked in the Chief Executive's report about why Agriculture Ministers had been involved in the EU decision (reported in the Times) to raise the threshold for genetically modified (GM) ingredients in "GM free" organic food from 0.1% to 0.9% when this appeared essentially to be a labelling issue, and therefore for the FSA.
2. By way of background, the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) takes the lead for the Government's policy on organic farming. The decision on the threshold for GM ingredients in organic food forms part of wider discussions on a European Commission proposal for replacing the 1991 standards for organic food production. Historically the standards primarily covered agricultural production and fell within Defra's remit. The standards have subsequently been widened to include a wide range of products including food and clothing as well as organic farming, and the lead has remained with Defra. The negotiating line on the threshold level for the Agriculture Council was agreed across Whitehall departments (including consultation with the FSA), as policy on GM issues is subject to collective agreement. Defra had previously consulted with stakeholders in reaching a position on this level.
3. The 0.9% threshold for the accidental presence of GM material in organic food is consistent with the EC GM labelling rules for all food ingredients which were agreed in 2003. In the absence of any specific rules for GM presence in organic food the EC GM labelling rules would apply as these cover all food and food ingredients. These rules permit the presence of GM material up to 0.9% for authorised GMOs, providing the presence is accidental. Intentional use of GMOs at any level requires labelling as 'GM'
4. Reports in the media suggested that the threshold had been raised from 0.1% to 0.9%, however previously there has not been a separate threshold for the accidental presence of GM ingredients in organic food, and this is therefore untrue. Supermarkets may work to a threshold lower than 0.9%, as suggested in the media, however this will be a commercial decision.
5. In addition, legally there are no controls for 'GM free' labelling for food ingredients other than rules on misleading claims. Where the FSA has been alerted to a company or retailer using the term 'GM free' we explain that there are no rules for the use of the term 'GM free', and that consumers should check with the company/retailer as to the criteria that is being employed in using the term.

Contact:

Clair Baynton Tel 020 7276 8566

Novel Foods, Additives and Supplements Division

Trudy Netherwood Tel 020 7276 8592

Novel Foods, Additives and Supplements Division