

March 23, 2001
Toronto Star

MONSANTO PULLS ALTERED POTATOES IN WAKE OF CONSUMER RESISTANCE

By John Spears

Genetically modified potatoes have been pulled off the market by Monsanto Canada Inc.

The company says its strain of Naturemark potato, genetically modified to resist the Colorado potato beetle, will no longer be sold because the company is concentrating on other crops.

Others in the potato industry say stiff resistance in the marketplace to the altered potato is the real reason for its withdrawal.

“People aren't really too keen on it,” said Larry Cappuccitti of Ontario Potato Distributing Inc. in Alliston. “Why, I don't know, but they aren't, from the calls I get from consumers.”

His family farm grows 2,500 acres of potatoes, as well as bagging and distributing potatoes from 10 other farmers. They sell to two supermarket chains.

Cappuccitti said he doesn't know enough about genetically modified crops to feel comfortable with them.

“We just decided to stand on the sidelines and stick with the stuff we've grown for the last 30 years.”

Adele Pelland of Monsanto said the company was happy with the potatoes but has decided to concentrate on wheat, oilseeds, cotton and corn.

She couldn't provide sales figures for the altered potatoes, which have been developed in three different varieties. The company inserted a gene in the plants that made the leaves indigestible to potato beetles, a major pest for the industry.

The modified crops suffered a blow last year when french fry giant McCain Foods (Canada) sent a letter to growers informing them that it would not accept genetically modified potatoes.

Customer resistance was the main factor in the decision, said McCain spokesperson Scoop Fredstrom.

“Our role is to produce what our customers want,” he said in an interview from Florenceville, N.B.

“There were some concerns expressed by a few of our major customers” about selling genetically modified potato products.”

Cappuccitti said his firm's next order of bags will have new labels, identifying the potatoes as non-genetically modified.

REUTERS

March 21, 2001

Monsanto exits biotech potato business

ST. LOUIS, Mo. (Reuters) - Monsanto Co. said Wednesday it was doing away with its genetically modified potatoes as part of a streamlining of its line of biotech crops offerings.

Though seed is still available for planting, Monsanto will not make any more available, said company spokesman Loren Wassell.

"The potato is a great crop, but its a niche crop," Wassell said. "We're putting our focus on four key crops," those being wheat, corn, soybeans and cotton, Wassell said.

Monsanto, a St. Louis-based agricultural biotechnology and herbicide company of which Pharmacia Corp. , owns 85 percent, unveiled its NewLeaf potato in 1995 as genetically modified to repel potato beetles.

Last year, fast-food chains, including McDonald's Corp, told their french-fry suppliers to stop using Monsanto Co.'s genetically modified potato amid opposition to genetically modified crops and concerns about their safety.

Monsanto pulls plug on NatureMark spuds: The company would only say it is concentrating its biotechnology efforts on four major crops

BY PETER RESCHKE

Ontario Farmer 6/3/01

Monsanto has decided to get out of the genetically modified business - for potatoes.

Starting with the 2001 season, the company will no longer market its NatureMark potato, the one that features a Bt gene to help it ward off Colorado potato beetles. Adele Pelland, the company's manager of public affairs, says Monsanto will buy back any pre-commercial lead seed that growers have already purchased. Common seed, which is currently held by a few growers, can still be planted this year since the varieties are still registered, she says.

The announcement came "as kind of a surprise", says OMAFRA potato specialist Eugenia Banks. She says seed growers received letters announcing the decision a couple of weeks ago.

Although the genetically modified varieties Shepordy and Atlantic gave growers new resistance against insects and disease, Banks says sales of the varieties "were not very good." She says the varieties were agronomically good but there was concern about consumer reaction, which was heightened when One major processor, McCain,

decided it would no longer buy GMO spuds.

Pelland played down the antiGMO controversy and would only say that Monsanto has been forced to concentrate its biotech resources in strategic areas. From now on the company will be focusing on corn, oilseeds, wheat and cotton.

"We've had to scale back our activities with other crops," she says.

Shepordy had two resistance genes, one to combat Colorado potato beetles, the Other against mosaic virus, Banks says. Atlantic only carried the Bt gene against the beetles.

MONSANTO'S GENETICALLY MODIFIED POTATOES

March 21, 2001

Wall Street Journal/Reuters

Monsanto Co. is, according to these stories, quietly mothballing its six-year-old genetically modified potato, the first bioengineered crop it launched.

Monsanto, a St. Louis agricultural biotechnology and herbicide company 85%-owned by Pharmacia Corp., of Peapack, N.J., was cited as confirming Tuesday that it will stop selling genetically modified seed to U.S. and Canadian potato farmers after this spring.

Launched in 1995, Monsanto's NewLeaf potato is equipped with a gene from a microorganism to make a toxin that repels a bug called the Colorado potato beetle. Monsanto advertised the potato to farmers as a way to greatly reduce their spending on pesticides, but NewLeaf never captured more than 5% of the potato-seed market.

The stories say that many potato farmers, hard pressed by a price-depressing glut of spuds, haven't been willing to pay the premium Monsanto charges for its genetically modified seed. Meanwhile, some food companies have shied away from using the genetically modified potato to avoid getting wrapped up in the debate over the safety of bioengineered food.

Last year, for example, fast-food giant McDonald's Corp. told its french-fry suppliers to stop using the potato from Monsanto, the only U.S. company to launch a genetically modified version of the tuber. As a result, J.R. Simplot Co., a major maker of french fries, instructed its farmers to stop growing NewLeaf potatoes.

At its peak in 1999, NewLeaf potatoes were planted on about 55,000 acres in North America.

NewLeaf acreage shrank by roughly half last year. Monsanto's decision to add a new genetically engineered feature to its potato -- resistance to the LeafRoll virus -- did little to perk up sales.

Monsanto spokeswoman Lori Fisher was cited as saying the company decided several months ago to shelve the NewLeaf potato in order to focus its research and marketing funds on four far bigger markets for genetically modified seed: oilseeds, cotton, corn and wheat. Last year, for instance, U.S. farmers grew on 45 million acres soybean plants genetically modified to tolerate exposure to Monsanto's Roundup herbicide.

Ms. Fisher was quoted as saying that, "Potatoes are a great niche product. We hope some day we can come back to it."

Monsanto said the dozens of employees who worked on its NewLeaf potato are being reassigned to other departments or have left the company. The NewLeaf marketing organization was based in Boise, Idaho, and field research was conducted in Maine.

=====
CBC Website

http://cbc.ca/cgi-bin/templates/view.cgi?category=Canada&story=/news/2001/04/30/GMpotatoes_su_010430

Monsanto shelves biotech potatoes

April 30, 2001

CHARLOTTETOWN - Environmentalists are claiming victory in their fight against genetically modified organisms now that biotechnology giant Monsanto Company has decided to stop selling a brand of potatoes.

But the company says environmental concerns had nothing to do with its decision to shelve its Naturemark potatoes.

About a half-dozen farmers on Prince Edward Island have been growing the spuds – which are engineered to resist pests – for the past few years.

Environmentalists have protested against their use for just as long, concerned that too little was known about the long-term effects the genetically engineered potatoes would have on the environment, or on people, despite the fact the potatoes have been approved for consumption.

Monsanto spokesman Lorne Wasell says taking Naturemark off the market was simply a business decision, made so the company can concentrate on its money-makers such as corn, oil seeds and cotton.

"So we've chosen to focus, for business reasons, on those key crops," he said.

But environmentalists aren't buying that argument. Some, such as Sharon Labchuk, think negative publicity is the reason for Monsanto's decision.

"We were one of the first to sound the alarm about the GMO potatoes," she said. "Because they appeared on the grocery store shelves on P.E.I. very quickly."

Labchuk says many major french fry processors and fast food restaurants across the continent have stopped buying genetically modified potatoes – in part, she says, because of the protests.

The farmers who have been growing the Naturemark potatoes say they'll harm the environment more now that they'll be going back to using pesticides.