

# Three dangerous little pigs

**BY PAT VENDITTI**

This week, the government agency that's responsible for Canada's food safety quietly slipped out an announcement that three little pigs had gone to market by mistake in Quebec. The animals were genetically engineered as part of a program to produce pharmaceutical proteins, and their safety for use in the human food chain has never been assessed.

This is a major breach of Canada's food-safety program, which explicitly prohibits the release of genetically engineered animal material into the environment or food system. The government announcement stated that officials were taking "action to control" this situation.

Unfortunately, this is precisely what the same agency said in a virtually identical announcement made two years ago, when 11 little genetically engineered (GE) pigs accidentally went to market in Ontario. The steps taken were either not fast enough, or they have simply failed. What is happening to Canada's food safety, and can the government be counted on to protect us?

The government department that is supposed to make sure our food is safe is the Canadian Food Inspection Agency, or CFIA. This body oversees the approval process for GE ingredients in the human food chain -- foods that we eat directly or foods fed to livestock. It is the CFIA that is in the frame for failing to act early or comprehensively enough to keep mad-cow disease at bay. It is this agency that failed to prevent the import and use in food production of GE "Starlink" corn -- a grain that is not legal in Canada. And it is this agency that is currently responsible for considering whether to approve GE wheat -- a crop that Canadian farmers fear would destroy their markets.

But back to the three little piggies. They were the property of TGN Biotech -- a research firm based in Ste-Foy, Quebec. TGN has altered the fundamental genetic makeup of these animals, so that the semen of the male pigs contains some form of pharmaceutical protein.

The litters of pigs contain both genetically engineered and "normal" animals, and the non-engineered pigs are sent to market. Naturally, the female gene-altered pigs do not have semen to harvest for pharmaceutical ingredients, but they are genetically altered in the same way as the male animals. Neither male nor female GE pigs are approved for release into the environment or use in the human food chain -- in fact no GE animals have been approved for this purpose anywhere in the world.

In this case it appears that, through human error, three of the genetically engineered female pigs were confused with their conventional sisters, and sent off to a rendering plant in Quebec. From there they were further distributed to feed mills and farms in Quebec and Ontario, for use as livestock feed.

The biotech company realized its mistake and the CFIA has been scrambling to control this event. They have also been trying to hose down the issue, claiming that these pigs are probably safe for the human food chain, when the reality is that their safety has never been tested. Such releases are illegal, and have unknown consequences for human health and the environment.

It is unclear if meat from animals fed this contaminated feed has been sold to consumers.

What with mad-cow disease, trans fats, and toxins in farmed fish, Canadians have had their confidence in Canada's food-safety system shaken of late.

Canadian wheat farmers are in a state of alarm over the potential approval of GE wheat, as 80 per cent of the markets for that product say they don't want it, and may reject all Canadian wheat if any GE variety is grown. Well, given that the CFIA can't keep whole pigs out of the system, why should buyers expect that GE wheat won't end up in conventional shipments?

It's time for Parliament to step in. First of all, it has to find out what the consequences are for this apparent flagrant disregard of the food-safety system. After all, as far as Greenpeace can find out, there have been no prosecutions or penalties from previous incidents. It appears that food safety at the CFIA depends more on good fortune than precaution.

Parliament needs to look beyond its current scandals to an issue that directly affects every one of us -- the safety of our food. We need a parliamentary inquiry into how these repeated breaches of the system keep occurring, and specifically into how GE life-forms are handled.

Meanwhile, there should be a moratorium on the development of new GE products in Canada. We should take concrete steps -- not to pacify public opinion, but to assure Canadians and our international markets that our food supply is, as our government likes to claim, the safest in the world.

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