

08/22/06 - Japan rice ban worries some California farmers

By Robin Hindery, Associated Press

SACRAMENTO - A recent Japanese ban of long-grain rice from the United States has set off alarm among California farmers and added fuel to a debate over genetically modified rice.

On one side, some farmers and industry groups say the ban does not pose a direct threat to California's crop, which is almost entirely short- and medium-grain rice. They add that the state's tightly regulated system for the introduction of any new rice variety has protected its products from the sort of contamination that prompted Japan's decision.

But others worry that restrictions on the biotech industry are insufficient, and that contamination is a near certainty in a state where hundreds of crops are grown in close proximity.

"Biotech does not recognize a fence line where one farmer's property ends and another begins," said Bryce Lundberg, a rice grower with Lundberg Family Farms.

The farm, based near Chico in the northern Sacramento Valley, supports keeping California free of genetically modified organisms, or GMOs. Lundberg said the situation surrounding the Japanese rice ban "points at the heart of the reason the farm opposes them."

Japan on Saturday suspended U.S. long-grain rice imports after supplies were found to contain trace amounts of a genetically engineered variety that is not approved for sale.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture said Friday that the contamination had been found in samples from storage bins in Arkansas and Missouri, but that the exact source had not been identified because the bins held rice from several Southern states.

Japan is the biggest foreign market for California rice a \$500 million industry that relies on exports for 50 percent of annual sales.

Japanese consumers have a long-standing aversion to biotechnology and any changes to their food supply. A ban on U.S. beef over fears of mad cow disease was lifted just a few weeks ago.

"Three of our top markets Japan, Taiwan and North Korea are very clear on their position on genetically engineered crops," said Renata Brillinger of Californians for GE-Free Agriculture, a coalition of environmental groups and family and organic farms. "And Japan is very influential over decisions that Taiwan and North Korean markets make."

Brillinger and others say that although it is business as usual right now for the California rice industry, any future contamination of the crop by GMOs could have an immediate and severe economic impact.

The state's farmers produce nearly 2 million tons of rice annually, making California the second largest rice-growing state in the nation behind Arkansas. Rice is produced on about 500,000 acres, primarily in the Sacramento Valley.

The crop is primarily self-pollinated, so the likelihood of cross-pollination is small, Brillinger said. But every stage from harvesting to stocking supermarket shelves is highly consolidated, she said, and therefore risky.

"Contamination is inevitable," she said. "It's just a matter of when and how."

Kent McKenzie, director of the Rice Experiment Station, sees much less cause for alarm.

"This material has never been grown in the fields of California," he said of the aberrant rice found in the South.