



For Immediate Release, January 17, 2017

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USDA Grants Final Approval for Invasive GE Grass

Rushed Approval of Genetically Engineered Bentgrass Granted Despite Ongoing Threat to Agriculture, Environment

PORTLAND, Ore.— The U.S. Department of Agriculture today issued a final deregulation [decision](#) approving Monsanto and Scotts' genetically engineered (GE) bentgrass, even as the highly invasive creeping grass continues to spread unchecked beyond its Oregon and Idaho test plots.

Decades-old outdoor experiments have proven the bentgrass impossible to control since it escaped from “controlled” plots and invaded irrigation ditches, riverbanks and the Crooked River National Grassland, crowding out native plants and the wildlife that depends on them. Despite more than a decade of efforts and millions of dollars spent, the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Scotts and Monsanto have failed to curb the spread of the invasive grass. Yet now the USDA has capitulated to Monsanto's and Scotts' request that federal regulators relinquish any authority over the GE grass, leaving local landowners and state of Oregon to wrestle with the problem.

“The USDA's decision ignores a groundswell of united opposition from state departments of agriculture, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, university professors, scientists, farmers and conservationists,” said Lori Ann Burd, director of the environmental health program at the Center for Biological Diversity. “Because this blatant bow to industry will continue to harm farmers, endangered species and the precious landscape, the USDA has left us with no choice but to explore our legal options to return the burden of controlling this weedy grass back to the shoulders of the corporate profiteers who brought it into the world.”

The GE bentgrass has already illegally contaminated at least three Oregon counties, and the ultralight grass seeds and pollen have proven impossible to eradicate. Farmers and noxious weed experts in eastern Oregon have been outspoken critics of the proposal to approve the grass. In response to widespread contamination, GE creeping bentgrass was declared a noxious weed in Malheur County in 2016. With this approval the responsibility for controlling contamination now shifts from the USDA, Scotts and Monsanto to individual farmers and landowners, left alone to grapple with the problem.

“This decision is a slap in the face to family farmers,” said Jerry Erstrom, chairman of the Malheur County Weed Board. “It’s extremely disappointing that the USDA has ignored the concerns of those of us affected by the existing contamination, as well as the Oregon and Idaho departments of agriculture, and concerned folks from across the region. I just can’t believe that they will turn this loose and let Scotts and Monsanto walk away from what they did here.”

“USDA’s approval of this genetically engineered grass is as dangerous as it is unlawful,” said George Kimbrell, senior attorney for the Center for Food Safety (CFS). “The agency is giving Monsanto and Scotts a free pass for the harm their product has already caused farmers and the environment, and is irresponsibly gambling future harm on nothing more than their empty promises.” CFS won a 2007 legal victory declaring the GE creeping bentgrass field trials unlawful. Kimbrell authored this [December 2016 article](#) on the GE bentgrass saga to date.

Unlike the USDA, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has recognized the danger of the novel GE grass and its likelihood of spreading out of control. The federal wildlife agency [concluded](#) that if approved, the grass is likely to jeopardize the continued existence of the endangered Willamette daisy and Bradshaw’s lomatium and harm the critical habitat of the endangered Fender’s blue butterfly and Willamette daisy.

The Center for Biological Diversity is a national, nonprofit conservation organization with 1.1 million members and online activists dedicated to the protection of endangered species and wild places.

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