

# Beer giant threatens boycott over 'medicinal' grain

Concern over genetically-modified medicinal crops

**WASHINGTON (AP) -- Anheuser-Busch Cos., the nation's No. 1 buyer of rice as well as its largest brewer, says it won't buy rice from Missouri if genetically-modified medicinal crops are allowed to be grown in the state.**

The St. Louis-based beer giant is the latest company to express concern over plans by Ventria Biosciences to grow 200 acres of rice engineered to produce human proteins capable of making medicine.

The company says it is concerned about possible contamination.

Biotechnology firms have been seeking federal approval for outdoor plantings, often called "biopharming" because the idea is to lower drug-making costs by using plants to grow medications.

Other food companies, environmentalists and farmers have said they fear genetically-altered rice could cross-pollinate other food crops and introduce foreign genes into the regular food chain.

Last month, Arkansas-based Riceland Foods Inc., the world's largest rice miller and marketer, asked federal regulators to deny a permit for Ventria's project, saying Riceland customers don't want to risk buying genetically-modified rice. Anheuser-Busch is believed to be the first major company to threaten a boycott over the issue, according to comments filed last month with the Agriculture Department.

"Given the potential for contamination of commercial rice production in this state, we will not purchase any rice produced or processed in Missouri if Ventria introduces its pharma rice here," Jim Hoffmeister, a vice president at Anheuser-Busch, said Tuesday.

Scott Deeter, president of Sacramento-based Ventria, called Anheuser-Busch's threat "totally irresponsible" and said fears of contamination are overblown. He cited Ventria's plans to use "a totally closed system of production" with a plant that pollinates itself and is separated geographically from any other crop.

Biopharming has been growing for a decade despite continued attacks from genetic engineering foes who fear such work has not been studied enough to ensure the safety of the nation's food supply if accidental mixing occurs.

Genetically-modified crops are regulated by the USDA, but state governments are allowed to review safety procedures and suggest more stringent regulation of the companies before a permit is issued.

Ventria is seeking USDA approval to grow rice genetically enhanced with synthetic human genes to produce the proteins lactoferrin and lysozyme, which the company hopes to harvest and refine for use in medicines to fight diarrhea and dehydration. The USDA can either deny Ventria's permit or issue a permit with additional

conditions.

Since 1995, the USDA has approved more than 300 biopharming plantings around the country, though most are for small outdoor plots of less than an acre each. If Ventria's application is approved, its site would be the largest to date, USDA spokeswoman Karen Eggert said.

No human drug made from genetically-engineered crops has yet been approved for commercial use.

The issue has already roiled California's \$500 million-a-year rice industry. Last year, California regulators denied Ventria's application to grow commercial quantities of rice with human genes after rice growers said they feared international customers would refuse to buy conventionally-grown crops out of contamination fears.

Meanwhile, farmers in southeast Missouri, where nearly all of the state's \$100 million rice crop is grown, have presented Missouri's agriculture director a petition with 175 signatures opposing the plans. Missouri is the sixth-largest rice-producing state.

Despite the concerns, the Missouri Farm Bureau has continued to support Ventria, which recently announced it was moving from Sacramento, California to Northwest Missouri State University. There it will become the anchor tenant of a new center for plant-made pharmaceuticals.

"Any concerns have been addressed thoroughly to the satisfaction of the scientific community," said university president Dean Hubbard.