

# Judge halts planting of Roundup Ready biotech alfalfa

By Paul Elias  
Associated Press

**SAN FRANCISCO** — A federal judge Thursday barred the planting of genetically engineered alfalfa nationwide until the government can adequately study the crop's potential impact on organic and conventional varieties.

U.S. District Court Judge Charles Breyer made permanent a temporary ban he ordered in March on alfalfa with genetic material from bacteria that makes the crop resistant to the popular weed killer Roundup.

Breyer said the U.S. Department of Agriculture must conduct a detailed scientific study of Roundup Ready alfalfa's ef-

fect on the environment and other alfalfa varieties before deciding whether to approve it.

USDA spokeswoman Rachel Iadicco said the agency would conduct the study, which could take up to two years to complete.

The Center for Food Safety in Washington, D.C., had sued on behalf of farmers who argued that the genetically engineered seed could contaminate organic and conventional alfalfa varieties.

Alfalfa farmers grow the crop primarily for livestock feed.

Monsanto Co., the St. Louis-based biotech company that developed the crop and makes the weed killer, and Forage

Genetics International, which is licensed to sell it, argued that the alfalfa would actually benefit the environment because fewer weed killers would be used.

Breyer sided with organic farmers and conventional growers who fear lost sales if their crops are contaminated by genetically engineered plants.

"The harm to these farmers and consumers who do not want to purchase genetically engineered alfalfa or animals fed with such alfalfa outweighs the economic harm to Monsanto, Forage Genetics International and those farmers who desire to switch to Roundup Ready alfalfa," Breyer wrote.

Some 220,000 acres of genetically engineered alfalfa were planted this year before the judge's ban went into effect. The judge ordered those farmers to ensure their crops do not contaminate adjacent fields of alfalfa.

The ruling is a major triumph for anti-biotech crusaders, who have been fighting the proliferation of genetically engineered crops. It is the first ban placed on such crops since the first variety — the Flavr Savr tomato — was approved in 1994.

"This permanent halt to the planting of this risky crop is a great victory for the environment," said Will Rostov, a

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Center for Food Safety attorney. "Roundup Ready alfalfa poses threats to farmers, to our export markets, and to the environment."

Monsanto officials said they are considering an appeal.

"We support a farmer's right to choose biotechnology, organic or conventional crops with the proper stewardship practices that make coexistence feasible," Monsanto Executive Vice President Jerry Steiner said. "We have heard from farmers across the country who are disappointed they can't access this technology."

Monsanto's share price rose 92 cents to \$59.55 in afternoon trading.

A message left at Forage Genetics was not immediately returned.

Alfalfa, which is used for livestock feed and can be planted in spring or fall, is a major crop grown on about 21 million acres in the country. California is the nation's largest alfalfa producer, growing the crop on about 1 million acres, primarily in the San Joaquin Valley.