

Farmers Sue USDA Over Monsanto Alfalfa - Again

By [Mike Ludwig](#)

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A coalition of farmers and environmental groups filed a lawsuit against the US Department of Agriculture (USDA) on March 18 to challenge the agency's recent decision to fully deregulate Monsanto's Roundup Ready alfalfa.

This is the second time the USDA has been sued over its approval of Roundup Ready alfalfa, which is genetically engineered (GE) to tolerate glyphosate, a popular herbicide commonly sold under the Monsanto brand name Roundup. The latest lawsuit, filed by groups like the Center for Food Safety (CFS) and the National Family Farm Coalition, opens a new chapter in the five-year battle over the GE alfalfa seed developed by Monsanto and Forage Genetics.

Industry watchdogs and farmers say that Roundup Ready alfalfa will increase reliance on already overused herbicides like Roundup, encourage the spread of herbicide-resistant "superweeds" and contaminate organic and conventional alfalfa with Monsanto transgenes through cross-pollination.

About 93 percent of the alfalfa planted in the US is grown without herbicides, but up to 23 million more pounds of herbicide could be sprayed annually following the introduction of Roundup Ready alfalfa into America's fields, according to USDA estimates.

Alfalfa is not just grown for human consumption. Alfalfa seed and hay feed dairy cows and other livestock, and the growing organic food industry is [concerned](#) that cross-contamination of transgenes could threaten the production of organic meat and milk. The USDA, however, recently concluded that Roundup Ready alfalfa does not pose a significant "plant pest risk" despite evidence that transgenes from the alfalfa have contaminated conventional alfalfa in the past.

The USDA first deregulated Roundup Ready alfalfa in 2005. Internal emails recently [obtained by Truthout](#) show that Monsanto worked closely with regulators to edit its original petition to deregulate the alfalfa. One regulator accepted Monsanto's help in conducting the USDA's original environmental assessment of the alfalfa.

Farmers and biotech opponents soon filed a lawsuit against the USDA to challenge the initial deregulation. In 2007, a federal court ruled that the USDA did not consider the full environmental impacts of Roundup Ready alfalfa and vacated the agency's decision to deregulate the alfalfa. Monsanto and its allies appealed the decision, and last year, the Supreme Court reversed the lower court's ruling, but ordered the USDA to produce an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) on the alfalfa before allowing it back into America's fields.

The USDA released a final EIS on Roundup Ready alfalfa in late 2010, and the GE alfalfa was

[fully deregulated](#) on January 27. The USDA went on to [approve](#) two more GE seeds within weeks of the alfalfa decision.

Roundup Ready alfalfa was deregulated just weeks after USDA Secretary Tom Vilsack was [pressed](#) by Republican Congressmen, some of whom recently received campaign contributions from Monsanto and the biotech industry, to dump a proposal to geographically isolate Roundup Ready alfalfa from organic and conventional alfalfa and, instead, legalize the GE seed without any government oversight.

The latest lawsuit filed by CFS and its allies argues that the final EIS ignores or downplays the threats Roundup Ready alfalfa poses to conventional alfalfa farms and the environment.

“USDA’s review is inaccurate and completely failed to consider critical issues,” said plaintiff farmer Phil Geertson of the family-owned Geertson Seed Farms company. “The decision to deregulate Roundup Ready alfalfa opens the door to widespread transgenic contamination, costing farmers their markets, reputation and ability to grow natural varieties.”

The USDA, however, [contends](#) that Monsanto’s transgenic alfalfa is just as safe as the alfalfa that the Geertson family has grown for decades.

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