

## **Safeway pulls 2 taco shell brands: Biotech corn found in Mission Foods, store labels**

By Dale Kasler Bee Staff Writer (Published Oct. 13, 2000)

Ensnared in a controversy that continues to bedevil the biotechnology industry, Safeway Inc. has recalled two brands of taco shells containing traces of biotech corn that have not been approved for humans.

The Pleasanton-based grocer said Thursday it took the action after laboratory tests conducted for an anti-biotech coalition found traces of StarLink corn in taco shells sold under Safeway's private label and the Mission Foods brand. StarLink, produced by Aventis CropScience Inc., was the same biotech corn linked to last month's recall of Taco Bell-brand taco shells marketed by Kraft Foods.

StarLink has been approved for livestock feed and industrial use but not for human consumption because federal regulators could not rule out the possibility it contains allergens. The corn, one of several varieties of biotech corn in existence, is genetically engineered to kill insects.

Safeway said the shells' producer, Mission Foods Corp., which it contacted right after the Taco Bell incident, had told the grocer that its shells didn't contain StarLink corn.

"We got written assurances back from them," said Safeway spokesman Brian Dowling. "That's what got us troubled."

Mission Foods officials couldn't be reached for comment.

Government officials said the shells pose minimal health risk.

The Environmental Protection Agency said the corn flour came from the same mill as the Taco Bell products -- Texas-based Azteca Milling, a partnership between Archer Daniels Midland Co. and Gruma S.A. of Monterrey, Mexico. Mission Foods is a Gruma subsidiary. Azteca said it is investigating the incident.

The Safeway matter is likely to fuel consumer suspicion of genetically engineered food ingredients, which are found in two-thirds of supermarket foods. Although unapproved biotech food has been found so far only in taco shells, the anti-biotech alliance Genetically Engineered Food Alert is having tests done on products such as corn chips, breakfast cereals and muffin mixes to see if StarLink shows up elsewhere.

"We've got some more products in the labs, and more to come," said Larry Bohlen of Friends of the Earth, which is part of the Food Alert alliance.

Another member of the coalition, the National Environmental Trust, called on the Food and Drug Administration to test all products containing yellow corn No. 2, the family of corn that includes Aventis' StarLink. The group criticized the FDA for not ordering the labeling of all foods containing biotech ingredients.

The Safeway recall was cheered by an anti-biotech group that had tried unsuccessfully to have Safeway ban biotech foods from its shelves.

"All in all, biotech is an industry in turmoil," said **Michael Passoff** of the **As You Sow Foundation** of San Francisco. **Passoff's** group in May pushed a shareholder resolution seeking the removal of all biotech foods from Safeway's stores; the proposal was defeated overwhelmingly.

Passoff said the taco shell controversy will increase support for such resolutions in the future.

"Shareholders are beginning to take a closer look at this," he said.

Safeway's stock fell \$1.06 to \$49.19 a share on Thursday.

But biotech supporters said the Safeway and Taco Bell incidents shouldn't tarnish the whole industry.

"It seems to be kind of an isolated incident," said spokeswoman Lisa Dry of the Biotechnology Industry Organization. "The public is going to be reassured that the FDA, the EPA, are going out of their way to make sure this never happens again."

In a related development, Aventis said Thursday it was pulling StarLink seeds from the market permanently at the EPA's urging.

The EPA said StarLink's health risks "if any, are extremely low," but added: "Aventis was responsible for ensuring that StarLink corn only be used in animal feed, and that responsibility clearly was not met."

Previously, the seed maker had temporarily halted sales and agreed to repurchase the existing crop of StarLink corn from farmers who had already planted the seeds.

Bee news services contributed to this report.