GM supergrass escapes the golf course

A GENETICALLY-modified grass created for golf courses has escaped into the wild, threatening to create 'superweeds.'

The grass has been altered at a laboratory in the U.S. to give it an immunity to spraying with the powerful weedkiller Roundup.

It is one of a number of GM plants created to convince the public of the benefits of the controversial technology.

The idea is to allow golf clubs to spray their fairways and greens so that weeds are killed off but the grass remains green, strong and perfectly manicured.

However, there are concerns that the escape of this strain of grass from the testing fields in Oregon will fundamentally effect the

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natural balance of the countryside. It could, in theory, transfer its chemical resistance to wild cousins, creating superweeds that would dominate vast areas. A number of GM crops, such as soya, maize and oilseed rape, are approved for cultivation in the U.S.

However, this is the first time that an unlicensed GM plant has escaped into the wild. The U.S. department of agriculture is so concerned it is running a full environmental impact assessment for the first time.

The plant, called creeping bentgrass (Agrostis stolonifera), carries a bacterial gene protecting it from the weedkiller glyphosate, which is marketed under the brand name of Roundup. It has been created by the Ohio-based firm Scotts in partnership with the U.S. GM giant Monsanto. Scotts is hoping the grass will be a winner with golf course owners.

However, a team from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency has found that GM pollen from the grass has contaminated a vast area around the test site in Oregon.

The team found nine GM plants among 20,400 plants sampled within a three mile radius of the test site. At least one of these was 2.5 miles away. Previous studies in the UK have found GM pollen carried up to three miles by bees from test growing sites in this country.

According to a report in the magazine New Scientist, the agency team showed that the GM grass has spread both by pollinating non-GM plants to form hybrids and by seed movement. It is a perennial so once in the wild it regrows year after year. It has many relatives in the U.S. with which it can cross-breed or hybridise, potentially passing on the resistance gene to other species.

This, in theory, could see the creation of superweeds which can't be killed with conventional weedkillers. If it were to reach wildernesses or establishes itself by waterways, highly toxic chemicals might be necessary to remove it.

GM technology has been widely opposed in Britain, Europe and many other parts of the world but its introduction in the U.S. has been largely without controversy.

Specialist Dr Eric Baack, of Indiana University, said: 'I don't think people will worry about lawns and golf courses if they've not worried already about GM food.'

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