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## Obama signs bill that protects makers of genetically engineered crops from federal courts

Published March 30, 2013 | FoxNews.com



President Obama approved a temporary spending bill this week that averted a government shutdown but also riled a slew of groups that say one provision protects Monsanto and other makers of genetically modified seeds and crops from federal courts.

The so-called Monsanto Protection Act essentially requires the Agriculture Department to approve the growing, harvesting and selling of such crops, even if the courts rule environmental studies are incomplete – undermining the judicial review system and posing potential health risks, critics say.

The biotech rider was included in spending bill HR 933 and signed Tuesday by Obama, despite White House protests and at least two petitions, including one by the group Food Democracy Now that got more than 250,000 signatures.

Critics have also attacked Senate Appropriations Chairwoman Barbara Mikulski, accusing the Maryland Democrat of allowing the rider to be added to the continuing resolution without a proper hearing.

Andrew Kimbrell, executive director of the Center for Food Safety, described the situation as a "hidden backroom deal."

"Sen. Mikulski turned her back on consumer, environmental and farmer protection in favor of corporate welfare for biotech companies such as Monsanto," he added. "This abuse of power is not the kind of leadership the public has come to expect from Sen. Mikulski or the Democrat majority in the Senate."

On Friday, Mikulski's office issued a statement that appeared to attempt to take the blame away from the senator, saying the provision was included in legislation completed in fall 2012, before she became chairwoman of the committee.

"Senator Mikulski understands the anger over this provision," the statement reads. "She didn't put the language in the bill and doesn't support it either."

Kimbrell called the statement a "positive first step" and said the Center for Food Safety and others have now set their sights on making sure the six-month provision is not included in future legislation.

He said Democratic Sens. John Tester, Montana; Kirsten Gillibrand, New York; Patrick Leahy, Vermont; Mark Begich, Alaska; and Richard Blumenthal, Connecticut, already oppose the rider.

Tester told Politico that the deal worked out with Monsanto, the world's biggest producer of genetically modified crops and seeds, was simply bad policy.

"These provisions are giveaways, pure and simple, and will be a boon worth millions of dollars to a handful of the biggest corporations in this country," he said.

And such major groups and food companies as the National Farmers Union, the American Civil Liberties Union, Stonyfield Farms and Nature's Path also purportedly oppose the rider.

A blog posting on the Stonyfield website in December 2012 appears to validate Mikulski's argument that the rider was added before her committee appointment.

"Even if the courts find that a (genetically engineered) crop shouldn't be planted until more research is done about its safety, no one could stop that crop from being planted, even temporarily," the posting states. "This provision clearly tells us that Congress thinks public health and safety should take a back seat to the expansion of GE crops. The good news is it's not too late to tell Congress that this is one holiday surprise we don't need."

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