**U.S.D.A. Approves Modified Potato** (by Andrew Pollack, NY Times, 11/7/2014 –*shortened, edited version*)

A potato genetically engineered to reduce the amounts of a potentially harmful ingredient in French fries and potato chips has been approved for commercial planting, the Department of Agriculture announced. The potato’s DNA has been altered so that less of a chemical called acrylamide, which is suspected of causing cancer in people, is produced when the potato is fried.

The new potato also resists bruising, a characteristic long sought by potato growers and processors for financial reasons. Potatoes bruised during harvesting, shipping or storage can lose value or become unusable.

The potato is one of a new wave of [genetically modified crops](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/subjects/g/genetically_modified_food/index.html?inline=nyt-classifier) that aim to provide benefits to consumers, not just to farmers as the widely grown biotech crops like herbicide-tolerant soybeans and corn do. The nonbruising aspect of the potato is similar to that of genetically engineered [nonbrowning apples](http://www.nytimes.com/2012/07/13/business/growers-fret-over-a-new-apple-that-wont-turn-brown.html?pagewanted=all), which are awaiting regulatory approval.

But the approval comes as some consumers are questioning the safety of genetically engineered crops and demanding that the foods made from them be labeled. Ballot initiatives calling for labeling were rejected by voters in Oregon and Colorado this week, after food and seed companies poured millions of dollars into campaigns to defeat the measures.

The question now is whether the potatoes will be adopted by food companies and restaurant chains. At least one group opposed to such crops has already pressed McDonald’s to reject them. Genetically modified potatoes failed once before. In the late 1990s, Monsanto began selling potatoes genetically engineered to resist the Colorado potato beetle. But the market collapsed after big potato users, fearing consumer resistance, told farmers not to grow them.

This time around could be different, however, because the new potato promises potential health benefits to consumers.

The potato does not contain genes from other species, as do many biotech crops. Rather, it contains fragments of potato DNA that act to silence four of the potatoes’ own genes involved in the production of certain enzymes. Future crops — the company has already applied for approval of a potato resistant to late blight, the cause of the Irish potato famine — will also have genes from wild potatoes.

“We are trying to use genes from the potato plant back in the potato plant,” said Haven Baker, who is in charge of the potato development. “We believe there’s some more comfort in that.”

That is not likely to persuade groups opposed to such crops, who say altering levels of plant enzymes might have unexpected effects. Doug Gurian-Sherman, a plant pathologist and senior scientist at the Center for Food Safety, an advocacy group, said that the technique used to silence the genes, called RNA interference, was still not well understood. “We think this is a really premature approval of a technology that is not being adequately regulated,” he said, adding that his group might try to get a court to reverse the approval of the potato.

The Agriculture Department, in its assessment, said the levels of various nutrients in the potatoes were in the normal range, except for the substances targeted by the genetic engineering. The company has submitted the potato for a voluntary [food safety](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/subjects/f/food_safety/index.html?inline=nyt-classifier) review by the Food and Drug Administration.