Are GMOs regulated? Scientist betting $10 million they aren't
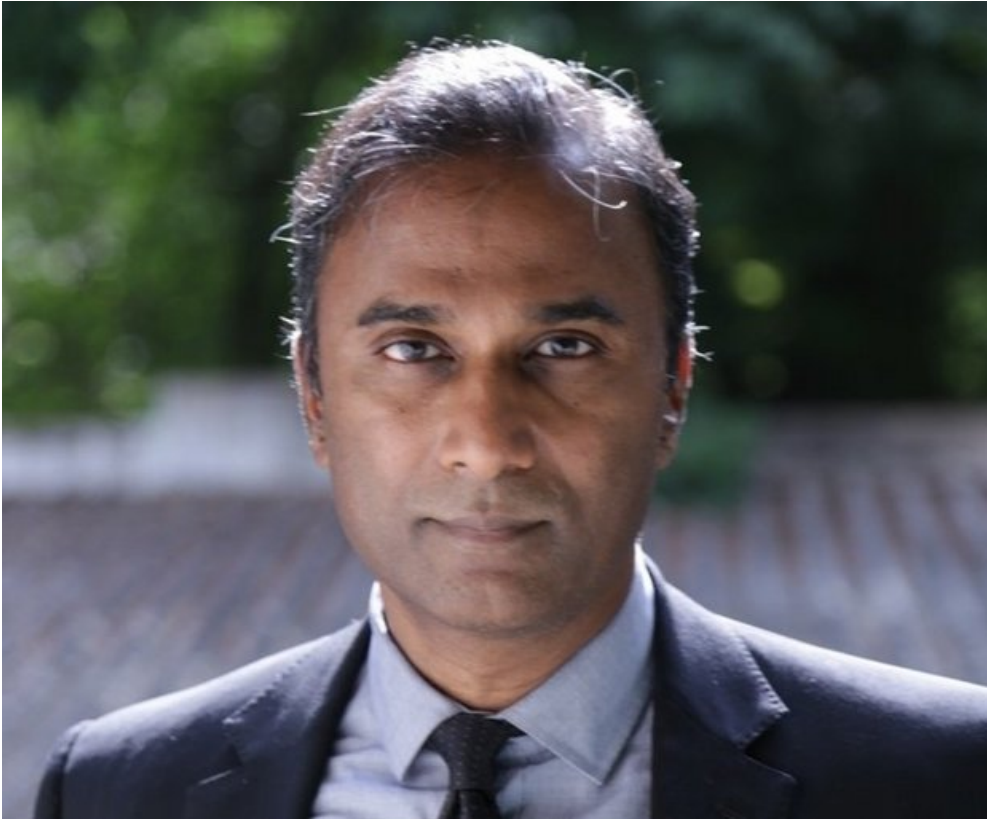

Dr. Shiva Ayyadurai. (Courtesy Jim Riffel)

[http://connect.nj.com/staff/jessmazzola/index.html] By **Jessica Mazzola | NJ Advance Media for NJ.com**
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CAMBRIDGE, Mass. — In the ongoing debate over the regulation of genetically modified foods, a $10 million building is now on the line.

In a recent press announcement, Dr. V.A. Shiva Ayyadurai – a Livingston High School graduate who **controversially claims to have invented email [http://mashable.com/2014/09/08/fran-drescher-shiva-ayyadurai-invented-email/#fDDYXFiTUqq5]** – issued a challenge to Monsanto, the nation's leading producer of genetically engineered foods: disprove my research about genetically modified organisms, or "GMOs," and I will give you a $10 million building I own in Massachusetts.

"I wanted to get at the heart of this GMO issue," said Ayyadurai, an MIT graduate, Fulbright scholar, and research scientist. "It is a huge controversy."

Ayyadurai **said he conducted studies [http://www.integrativesystems.org/systems-biology-of-gmos/]** that showed scientific differences between modified and non-modified foods.

"The results demand immediate testing along with rigorous scientific standards to assure such testing is objective and replicable," he said. "The safety of our food supply demands that science deliver such modern scientific standards for approval of GMOs."

ALSO: Livingston scientist marries actress Fran Drescher [http://www.nj.com/essex/index.ssf/2014/09/livingston_grad_marries_fran_drescher_to_be_honored_in_nj.html]

If Monsanto, he said, can prove that there is an international set of standards by which all genetically modified (also referred to as genetically engineered, or "GE") foods are measured, he will turn over the building.

Reached Friday, a spokeswoman for Monsanto refuted Ayyadurai's claims, calling them "uninformed."

"GM crops undergo safety assessments that are more rigorous and thorough than assessments of any other food crop in history," the spokeswoman said.

"The safety assessment strategy ensures that new GE crops are developed and tested in accordance with comprehensive risk assessment strategies and international safety assessment guidelines," including those set forth by the World Health Organization and Food and Agriculture Organization, she said.

As part of his research, Ayyadurai criticized the U.S. Food and Drug Administration's policy toward GMOs, which he claims allow the food companies to create their own individual standards by which to measure and test their own products.

"The FDA doesn't want to get involved," he said.

An FDA spokeswoman responded to an inquiry about the agency's role in GMO regulation by **pointing to literature on its website [http://www.fda.gov/forconsumers/consumerupdates/ucm352067.htm]** that explains how it and other government agencies regulate the industry.

While it acknowledges that the GMO companies produce the safety tests on their products, those assessments include "the identification of distinguishing attributes of new genetic traits, whether any new material in food made from the GE plant could be toxic or allergenic when eaten, and a comparison of the levels of nutrients in the GE plant to traditionally bred plants," the material says.

FDA scientists evaluate the safety assessment, it says, and "the consultation is complete only when FDA's team of scientists (is) satisfied with the developer's safety assessment."

But Ayyadurai, who made local headlines last year when he was **inducted into the Livingston Hall of Fame [http://www.livingston.org/Page/22153]** , and **married "The Nanny" actress Fran Drescher [http://www.nj.com/essex/index.ssf/2014/09/livingston_grad_marries_fran_drescher_to_be_honored_in_nj.html]** , maintained that the oversight is not enough.

"There is no conclusion as to whether or not (GMOs) are safe," he said.

MORE: GMO labeling debate in New Jersey [http://www.nj.com/healthfit/index.ssf/2015/07/gmo_food_labeling_in_nj_undercut_by_house_vote.html]

Though other researchers **have questioned the validity of Ayyadurai's study [http://kfolta.blogspot.com/2015/07/munich-is-not-by-florida-no.html]** , which is based on computational model research, he says it should serve as a jumping off point for more investigation.

"I am not pro or anti genetic engineering," he said. "I just think it is important to have a standard."

Scientists have debated GE foods since they entered the market 20 years ago. Tin-Chin Chu, a biology professor at Seton Hall University, said Ayyadurai's challenge throws an interesting wrench in the back-and-forth.

"There are quite a few (GMO research) papers out there, but they almost always take a side," she said. "The findings are usually very extreme...what we really need to have is a more unified and (long-term) study."

Ayyadurai said he has unsuccessfully reached out to Monsanto to discuss the issues and present his $10 million challenge. But, the company spokeswoman said it has received no such communication.

"While this appears to be a stunt, if he is truly interested, we would welcome the opportunity (to talk)," the spokeswoman said.

"And if he is serious about the building we would be willing to make arrangements with a charity."

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