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Food Fight: the future of biotech farming

Wednesday 4-22-09 BY: DAVID LICHTENSTEIN
Filed Under: Business

Sixth in a six-part series

By David Lichtenstein

Responsible biotechnology is not the enemy; starvation is. Without adequate food supplies at affordable prices, we cannot expect world health or peace.
— Former U.S. President Jimmy Carter

Just as the steam engine transformed the 19th century and the internal combustion engine and the microprocessor revolutionized the 20th century, scientists speculate that biotechnology applications in agriculture could have that same kind of impact on the 21st century.

"It is not an exaggeration to suggest that biotechnology is poised to become the most important new general purpose technology of the first half of the 21st century," wrote University of Minnesota professor Vernon Ruttan.

But like many new technologies, it is a promise that many

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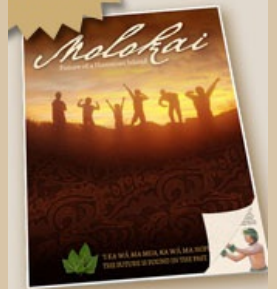
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believe has not yet lived up to its hype. "It is not yet possible to demonstrate measurable impacts of biotechnology on either human health or agriculture...," wrote Ruttan.

Obstacles for biotechnology

Before this technology can solve world hunger, critics have said that the five seed companies that dominate the industry need to share their discoveries more openly. Private sector control over the intellectual property rights for biotechnology tools is considered a major obstacle. Aggressive protection of seed and gene patents by companies like Monsanto also make it difficult for researchers at public universities to thoroughly study these organisms.

A common criticism is that the biotech industry may not understand all the unintended consequences of these products. These issues include crop gene drift and the transfer of plant bacteria genes to living human cells. Both critics and supporters of this new technology claim that the other is guilty of bad science and propaganda techniques.

Governments can't even agree if GMO crops are safe. A report from Germany last week said that the country will now ban the use and sale of Monsanto's GMO corn, alleging that the crop is harmful to wildlife. France, Austria, Hungary, Greece and Luxembourg have already banned Monsanto's MON 810 corn, which is resistant to the corn borer.

Monsanto is considering legal action in this matter because the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA) — the European Union's sole authority concerning the safety of GM crops — ruled MON 810 safe for commercial use.

Finding good information

Separating fact from fiction is a challenge. How do we know if a warning about GMO foods presents a real hazard to our health? The book "Tomorrow's Table" offers a guideline for determining the validity of a GMO food safety warning.

The guidelines are based on the research of Syracuse University professor Allan Mazur who wrote "True Warnings and False Alarms." First, a warning tends to be true if the first source is based on scientific research produced at a recognized scientific institution. A warning is more likely false if it comes from a government agent or citizen advocacy group. Secondly, false alarms are more likely if they come from a sponsor who has a bias against the producer of the alleged hazard. Lastly, news reports are less reliable if connected to earlier news stories instead of reporting findings from a primary source.

Using these guidelines, the author Pam Ronald, a University of California geneticist, points out several examples of false warnings sent out to the public regarding GMO foods. One example is the concern that Monsanto will control our food supply through the use of GMOs. This, however, is a nonscientific concern that involves policy, not the safety of eating the food, according to Ronald.

To get the real facts, a person needs to look at independent, peer-reviewed research from public universities and not just media reports (including this one).

Into the future

Nobel Laureate Dr. Norman Borlaug believes that the world does not have the luxury to overlook the benefits of GMOs. Wrote Borlaug: "The affluent nations can afford to adopt elitist positions and pay more for food produced by the so-called natural methods; the one billion chronically poor and hungry people of this world cannot. New technology will be their salvation, freeing them from obsolete, low-yielding,

and more costly production technology."

Borlaug argues against what he sees as an anti-scientific attitude that threatens the development of the science for the benefit of all.

Currently, the biotech industry is focused on developing pest resistant or herbicide tolerant crops that increase yields for commercial farmers.

This emphasis on crop protection for commercial production instead of improving crop yields and nutrition values for developing countries has led to criticism. Bill Aal, from the nonprofit organization Seattle Global Justice, said in a recent speech about the global food crisis, "the idea that GMOs (are) a solution to our food problem is up for grabs." Our grandchildren may be still debating this issue, but in the meantime, even GMO advocates are waiting for biotechnology to fulfill its promise of ending world hunger.

David Lichtenstein is the News Director for KMKK radio. Listen to KMKK, 102.3 FM, Molokai's only radio station, for Molokai news reports every weekday morning at 6 a.m., 7 a.m. and 8 a.m. He can be reached at news@kmkk1023.com.