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Opinion

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OUR VIEW

Food safety authority should rest with one agency

In his latest budget plan released earlier this month, President Obama proposed combining into one new agency the food safety functions scattered in various agencies within the Department of Agriculture and the Food and Drug Administration.

It's an idea we like, so much so that we suggested the same thing in this space a few years back. We're not sure the timing is right, though, and we want to see the particulars of the president's plan.

The Obama budget describes the current system as "fragmented," and that's a good word. At least 30 acts of Congress now grant authority over various food safety functions

to more than a dozen agencies. USDA's Food Safety and Inspection Service and the federal Food and Drug Administration are tasked with more than 80 percent of the food safety program.

The budget proposal envisions the creation of a "modern, science-based food safety regulatory regime drawing on best practices of both agencies." He would create the Food Safety Agency under the Department of Health and Human Services, the home of the FDA.

Obama said the consolidation will reduce the size of government and save money. We wouldn't hold our breath waiting for that. The president was short on

details, and the individual budget documents prepared by USDA and the Department of Health and Human Services are silent as to the upfront costs of consolidating and integrating existing programs into a new bureaucracy.

A group of Senate and House Democrats has introduced the Safe Food Act of 2015 to facilitate the president's plan. It lays out in some detail which current agencies would be consolidated under the Department of Health and Human Services.

Consolidating food safety programs in one place isn't a new idea. Many of the same senators and representatives introduced much the

same bill in 2007.

During hearings then, Collin Peterson, D-Minnesota, who was chairman of the House Ag Committee, liked the idea — except the part about safety programs moving from the USDA and the jurisdiction of his committee. The bill was never enacted.

Observers say the current bill faces long odds in the Republican-controlled Congress. While some believe that's because the GOP favors business, we think it's because congressional committee members — Republican and Democrats — hate to give up authority and the related campaign contribution stream.

The political intrigue aside, commodity groups say that this might not be the time to change the food safety organizational chart. Farmers and food processors are in the process of dealing with new safety regulations being drafted by the FDA to implement the Food Safety Modernization Act passed in 2010.

They have a legitimate point. It's going to be hard enough to implement the new rules without also dealing with the tumult the merging of diverse agencies and their unique cultures will create.

Nonetheless, we think having one food regulatory scheme administered by one agency makes sense in the long run.

OUR VIEW

Port disaster must not be repeated

The bare-knuckled brawl underway at West Coast container ports is damaging agricultural exports and those farmers and ranchers who depend on them for their livelihoods.

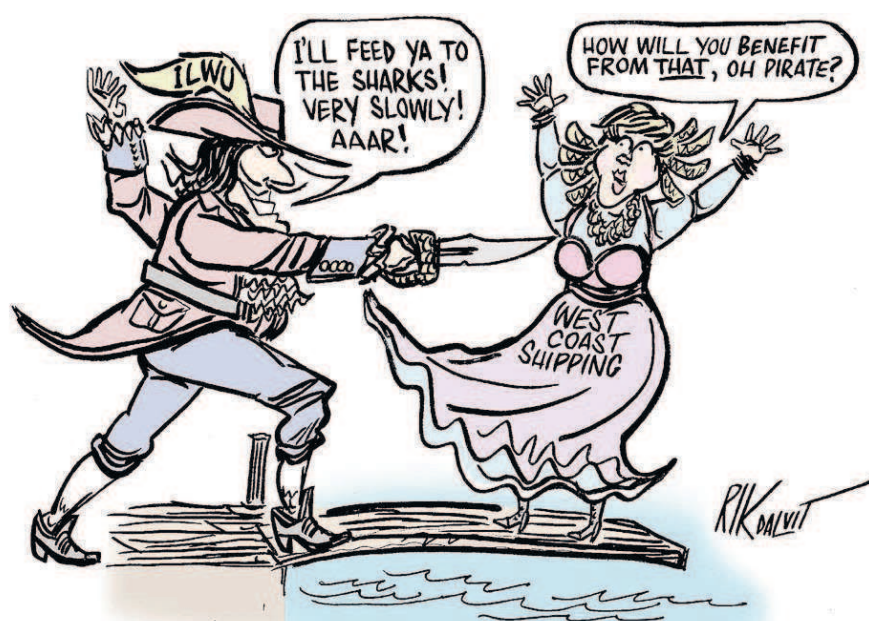
The shipment of feed, food and fiber to customers in Asia and beyond is fundamental to Western farmers. A long list of crops including hay, beef, pork, Christmas trees, apples, berries, potatoes and nuts are all shipped via containers.

Since last fall, operators of the West's container ports, represented by the Pacific Maritime Association, have been locked in a battle with members of the International Longshore and Warehouse Union over a new contract. As part of that, union members have slowed the loading and unloading of containers. They blame the PMA for the problems. In turn, the PMA blames the union. Ports now handle only a fraction of the number of containers they did before the slowdown. Some days, no union members show up for work.

As a direct result of the slowdown, agricultural exporters have suffered an economic body blow. Overall, the estimated damage is \$444 million a week in lost business, according to the Agriculture Transportation Coalition. To avoid West Coast ports, some exporters have rerouted their shipments through East Coast ports. Imagine being forced to send a shipment of french fries from Washington state to Hawaii or Japan by way of Florida.

Good grief.

Adding to the problems, in Portland, Hanjin, the major container shipper, is leaving.



Rik Dalvit/For the Capital Press

The massive losses and added expenses are bad enough. Ag exporters are also losing customers. As a result, competitors in New Zealand, Australia, Canada and elsewhere have reaped a windfall of business courtesy of West Coast port operators and the union.

We won't blame any one group. There's plenty of that to go around. What we know is they will eventually reach an agreement. When they do, they will act as though they have done everyone a big favor.

Hardly.

What they have done is needlessly cost their customers and the port owners — the public — billions of dollars. And the politicians have just stood around with their hands in their pockets. What they should be doing is writing legislation to ban strikes, work slowdowns or other labor actions that impede the free flow of trade through the ports. That can be

accomplished by putting ports under the federal Railway Labor Act. That law requires unions and employers to negotiate and go through mediation while they keep working.

Mark T. Anderson, president and CEO of Anderson Hay & Grain in Washington state, summed up the port mess best.

"At this point we have a broken system. We have publicly owned facilities (the ports) that have global operators who can't come to terms with the people who work there and it's costing billions of dollars to the U.S. economy," Anderson said.

"The last time I checked most politicians ran on the idea exports were important and jobs were important," he said. "It doesn't seem to be playing out that way. From the president on down, they are aware but seem to have done little.

"It's incredibly disappointing."

Readers' views

Thoughts about choice, GMOs

A reaction to "Why some farmers choose to grow GMO crops."

Legends abound, both urban and rural, this is true whichever side of any contentious controversy you happen to be standing on. GMO opponents conjure up their "facts" and the GMO proponents have their own: nothing really new under the sun — it is how politics work.

When you take a look from 30,000 feet, the anti-GMO camp claims to be motivated by human and animal health and environmental concerns AND a desire for consumers to have the right to choose by knowing if a given product contains GMOs. The

pro-GMO side tends to come from the economic sensibility side, crop yield, increased profit margins and lower labor costs AND freedom to choose to farm as they see fit. In America choice is everything and it is what makes the world of politics go 'round.

I don't wish to rehash old hash. No one seems to get converted by either side's arguments. I simply wish to offer up a caution to both sides.

To the anti-GMO group I suggest that a time is coming when the era of implanting genes that are naturally impossible for a plant or animal to mutate on its own and the use of gene guns to create so-called "frankenfoods" may be eclipsed by a new and different science. A science

that uses the plant's own genetics to engineer and manipulate plants at a gene level and below. This non-trans genetic engineering is already being accomplished and the old stance of GMOs as "frankenfoods" may need to be re-evaluated and the new methods examined before being summarily dismissed. Additionally, as was pointed out in the "Our View" article, the GMO camp now claims a reduction in overall pesticide use.

To the pro-GMO group I caution reliance upon perceived public acceptance of the safety of GMOs. Urban legends arise in the cities and it is the cities that farmers are feeding. All farmers must sell their goods to those same urban consumers as that is ultimately where the profits

must come from. Remember Alar and how quickly the public can turn around. GMOs are relatively new, many consumers are not aware of what they are or which foods contain them. If any studies surface that demonstrate a perceived health or environmental risk the whole GMO farming and food industries would be at risk of a huge shock.

That risk has nothing to do with a farmer's choice — it would be the consumer's choice. Regardless of the economic benefit it may not be prudent to put all the eggs in one genetic basket. Consumers thrive on choice the same as the farmers thrive on the choice of their farming philosophy.

Brian Quigley
Camano Island, Wash.

The GMO label fight misses bigger issues

By JON ELDON
For the Capital Press

Guest
comment
Jon Eldon



It appears that the GMO labeling argument is finally settled in Oregon — and it will remain that way until someone in the 50.1 percent or the 49.9 percent camp decides that it's never too early to start campaigning for the next round. This is clearly an issue on the rise, and if it seemed ugly and divisive this last time around, just wait. The fury of finger pointing will hide the fact that this political debate is mostly just muddying the waters and distracting us from more important questions.

I'm all for anything that improves transparency and allows consumers to make informed decisions, and food labels can be a great way to do this. However, this approach only works if these labels answer something about the food, and for that to happen we need to make sure we get the question right. This should sound familiar to anyone that has ever stepped into a classroom, as I think all teachers are required to say, "Make sure you read and understand the questions before you answer them" every time they hand out a test.

When it comes to GMOs, we're doing a poor job of even asking the right questions. For example, a recent "Food Demand Survey" by Oklahoma State University found that 82 percent of respondents supported mandatory labeling of all food containing GMO products, which sounds very straightforward. However it also found that 80 percent of respondents supported mandatory labeling of all food containing DNA. DNA, by the way, is found in everything that is, was, or might one day be alive, which would be all food except for salt licks and probably some types of Halloween candy.

The coming round of the GMO labeling fight, wherever it next happens, is a great opportunity to improve on this. Here are just two of the dozens of things that we need to work into the coming debates.

One, the issues that are often blamed on GMOs are usually far more pervasive. To take just one example, it is often claimed that GMOs prevent farmers from saving their seeds. In reality, growing out your own seed on a commercial scale is usually not practical unless you're a grain farmer (in which case that's the point). Even if you wanted to grow your own vegetable seed, for example, many non-GMO crop varieties are hybrids, which means that the seeds wouldn't have the same characteristics as the parent plants. Those non-GMO and non-hybrid varieties that are left might still be

patented through conventional breeding, in which case any replanting would probably be under contract restrictions. And while we're on the subject of seeds and genetics, it's worth noting that many non-GMO crop varieties began their career as a highly irradiated seed, since radiation causes random genetic mutations, a very small portion of which might prove to be valuable.

Two, "GMOs" are not actually a simple type of crop because there are important differences among those varieties that are born in a test tube, to borrow some imagery from 1950s science fiction movies. A neutral genetic marker — a portion of the DNA that doesn't code for a protein — might have been inserted to see if a different target gene was inherited through conventional breeding methods; an existing gene could have been turned on or off or up or down, such as to strengthen cell walls and reduce lodging; a specific gene could have been swapped with a nearly identical one from another species to produce a slightly different protein and a significantly different effect, such as with Round-Up Ready crops; or a completely novel gene could have been inserted into a crop genome, such as from the bacteria *Bacillus thuringiensis* (Bt) into corn.

Point being, forget the simplistic arguments that will soon again flood the airwaves. GM crops will not save the world — the world is just too complex for that — nor will avoiding them make all the problems go away. Are there important environmental, social and health implications of growing GM crops? Absolutely, but most of them come from "growing crops" and won't just disappear if you remove the "GM." Should consumers be able to make relevant and informed choices about the larger implications of the products in the grocery store aisle? Yes, please! But those choices must be relevant and informed or the choice is meaningless at best.

There is a lot to want to change about food production and food consumption, and allowing consumer choice to drive this change is great, but for this to work we have to read and understand the questions before picking up a No. 2 pencil and filling in our choice.

Jon Eldon worked with genetics as a conservation biologist and is now pursuing a Ph.D. at the University of California-Santa Cruz in soil fertility management and food security. He is on twitter at jondeldon.