

Caving in to unfounded opinions threatens tech advances, expert says

By CAROL RYAN DUMAS
Capital Press

SUN VALLEY, Idaho — Losing safe, viable and valuable technology to improve agriculture due to frightened, uniformed public sentiment is a very real threat, a university researcher says.

Alison Van Eenennaam, an animal geneticist at the University of California-Davis, told the Idaho Milk Processors Association annual conference there has to be a concerted effort by agriculture to stand up against the myths behind the opposition to such advances as genetically engineered crops or “we’ll have no technology left.”

Following a showing of “Food Evolution,” a new documentary film separating the hype from the science in the debate over GMOs, Van Eenennaam said the arguments used against GMO technology are not just a subtle interpretation of scientific data, they are “flat out lies.”

“It’s not a legitimate disagreement; it’s an agenda,” she said.

The anti-GMO campaign is rooted in fear-mongering and is risking technology that can improve agriculture and lessen its environmental impact, she said.

There’s no angst when it comes to using genetic technology in human medicine, such as insulin, or in pet vaccines, she said.

“Use in food tends to be where the fireworks come in,” she said.

Those fireworks resulted in marketers turning away from the hormone rBST, a safe technology to increase milk production in cows, to gain a market advantage in claiming their products were rBST-



Carol Ryan Dumas/Capital Press

Alison Van Eenennaam, an animal geneticist at the University of California-Davis, talks with Dale Gifford, a director of the Idaho Milk Processors Association, following her talk on GMOs during the association's annual conference in Sun Valley.

free. “When marketers cave to these demands, we take safe technology off the table. How many of these technologies are we willing to throw out for these short-term market advantages?” she asked.

The big controversy now is GMO crops, grown by 18 million farmers globally. With 16.5 million of those in developing countries, 90 percent of GMO crops are grown by small-scale farmers in developing countries, where there’s been a tremendous reduction in pesticide use, she said.

By far, the largest consumer of those crops is livestock, which has consumed that feed for more than 20 years. There’s been about 300 carefully controlled studies on the performance of those animal populations, showing no significant differences or deleterious trends in productivity, she said.

“Apparently no one wants to read them,” she said.

Anti-GMO sympathizers would prefer to latch onto

sensational, unreliable, politicized studies to confirm a predetermined bias, she said.

Numerous studies have also found no detectable genetically engineered DNA or GE proteins or glyphosate residues in milk, meat or eggs from animals consuming GMO crops, she said.

Meanwhile, there are genuine risks to food safety and public health, such as foodborne illnesses, heavy metals, dioxin and mycotoxins. Focusing instead on non-health risks associated with GMO feed is going down a path that’s not improving food safety and jeopardizing technology that can, she said.

In addition, abandoning the technology has huge environmental consequences. The adoption of GE crops has reduced global pesticide use 20 percent and decreased the use of more toxic pesticides. Through reduced fuel use and tillage changes, they’ve also significantly reduced greenhouse gas emissions

from those cropping areas — equivalent to removing 12 million cars from the road in 2015, she said.

She reminded the audience the public wasn’t keen on artificial insemination in animal agriculture when it first came about in the 1940s, but the result has been a significant increase in milk production from far fewer cows. That efficiency is attributable to genetic improvement enabled by AI. And genetic editing holds even more potential.

Referring back to the loss of rBST, she asked, “What if the public doesn’t like genetic selection? Are you going to give that up, too?”

Agriculture needs to work together to defend the technology and alter the discussion, focusing on the problems the technology is trying to fix, she said.

“It’s pretty simple math. The efficiency of agricultural production, you increase the environmental impact,” she said.

Heatwave stresses spring wheat, increases protein

By MATTHEW WEAVER
Capital Press

Summer heat is causing stress in Washington’s spring wheat crop, researchers say.

In its weekly regional crop progress and condition report, the USDA National Agricultural Statistics Service reported that “winter wheat continued to look good, while spring wheat did not.”

Stress caused by heat and late planting in a shorter growing season is to blame, said Mike Pumphrey, spring wheat breeder for Washington State University.

“Planting was delayed everywhere,” he said.

Pumphrey said maturity wasn’t as important this year as it is in some years, because soil moisture was good.

“Some of our later maturing lines that I would say do poorer in a typical hot, dry summer didn’t because there was soil moisture,” he said.

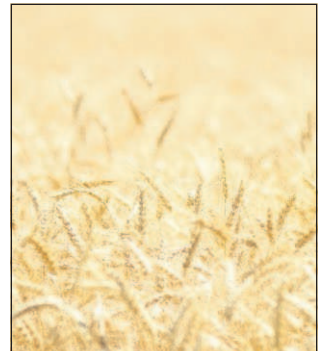
Irrigated wheat is likely to be down from usual years, but “quite healthy” overall, he said. Dryland acres where planting was delayed will likely be average to below average.

Later plantings are likely to suffer more, while earlier spring wheat plantings had the chance to tiller before higher temperatures occurred, said Ryan Higginbotham, director of WSU’s cereal variety testing program.

“Heat is the enemy of spring wheat,” Higginbotham said.

Higginbotham expects statewide spring wheat yields will be down, but higher winter wheat yields will offset them.

The effect varies across the state. In trials in the Horse Heaven Hills area, spring wheat yields doubled over last year, while in Lind,



EO Media Group File

A heatwave is causing stress in this year’s spring-planted wheat crop, causing higher-than-normal protein levels.

Wash., trials, yields were half of last year’s, he said.

Assuming test weights and grain soundness are otherwise OK, Pumphrey said the heat stress may boost protein, which is a desirable trait in dark northern spring wheat.

The wheat class has seen price upswings due to supply problems elsewhere in the U.S., from \$7.57 to \$7.67 per bushel on the Portland market for 13 percent protein, and \$7.83 to \$8.77 per bushel for higher protein levels.

“Although the yields may be lower, we should have high-enough protein or good protein,” he said. “That’s going to help (growers), instead of getting them a discount. Now, that has to be balanced with how many bushels are harvested, of course.”

Lower protein percentages are wanted in soft white wheat, which will also see higher levels due to the heat stress. WSU’s trials have shown above-average protein levels, averaging 12.5 to 13 percent, “which is not ideal,” Pumphrey said.

Soft white wheat is priced at \$5.16 to \$5.60 per bushel.

Higginbotham’s not aware of any price discounts for high protein soft white wheat, but said it’s possible as harvest progresses.

Researchers hunt for cause of onion disease

By SEAN ELLIS
Capital Press

ONTARIO, Ore. — Agricultural researchers in the Treasure Valley of Oregon and Idaho still haven’t discovered what’s causing an onion disease that damages the inside of bulbs, reducing their marketability.

However, they haven’t seen the onion disease so far this year and some people hope the so-called “onion bulb rot” issue was only a brief problem caused by a rare occurrence of various environmental factors.

The disease, which is not a human health issue, is caused by a plant pathogen known as fusarium proliferatum and can damage the inside of onion bulbs, making them look fine on the outside but not desirable



Sean Ellis/Capital Press

A field trial at Oregon State University’s agricultural research station near Ontario that is being used to try to determine the cause of an onion disease known as onion bulb rot is shown in this July 12 photo. Researchers at the University of Idaho’s agricultural research station in Parma are also working on the issue.

to consumers when they are cut open.

That type of fusarium fungi has caused a few cases of onion bulb rot over the years but it became a major issue in 2014 and 2015.

Both those years had unusually hot summers. Researchers believe the condition could be related to high temperatures.

“One of the ideas is that the hot summers we’ve had are causing that,” said Erik Feibert, a senior research assistant at Oregon State University’s Malheur County agricultural experiment station near Ontario.

That theory supposes that high temperatures facilitate a condition known as dry scale, which is when the top of the onion doesn’t completely close.

“That seems to provide the

pathogen an opportunity to infect the top of the bulb,” said Stuart Reitz, an OSU cropping systems extension agent.

But, he added, researchers don’t know for sure that heat is causing the problem and field trials are being conducted at OSU’s Ontario station as well as the University of Idaho’s experiment station in Parma to try to determine the exact cause.

“We really don’t know what combination of factors is causing it,” said Clint Shock, director of OSU’s Malheur County experiment station. “We don’t know when it’s happening and we don’t know why it’s happening.”

OSU researchers are using heat strips to add artificial heat to one plot of onions and straw mulch and kaolinite clay to reduce the heat load on another plot “to see if we observe any differences there,” Shock said.

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