Face Off:
Genetically engineered foods

Engineered food: benefit to society

Hilary Ferguson
The Clackamas Print

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In a perfect world, this fact would be mind-boggling enough that I wouldn't have to write any more. But, for the sake of educating you, the reader, I will go on to prove that genetically modified foods are not just a good thing, but something that we must embrace as a reality if we continue to procreate at the current rate.

Firstly, it is important to realize how the name of genetically modified (GM) food was slandered. Hippies. The hippies did it. Now, I may be what some consider a peace-loving dirt-hoot, but I also believe that there is no reason for millions of children to die of malnutrition every year. Environmental organizations have labeled genetically modified foods as unnatural—these foods are not the way nature intended, and are therefore inherently bad.

Well, hippie, do you know what is also unnatural? Trying to cram over 6 billion people onto our little planet! That's unnatural! While we're busy trying to find space for these people to live, agricultural space is at a premium, and it is imperative that we make the most of it. Hey, do you know what's better than a tomato plant that takes up one square foot of land and produces 25 tomatoes? A tomato plant that takes up one square foot of land and produces 50 tomatoes!

Many people have tried arguing that GM foods cause more allergies in people where natural foods would not. This simply isn't true. The fact is, this was a hasty point brought up by environmental organizations to push the public into believing that there was a tangible threat to eating GM foods. To this day, there is no proof that eating genetically modified food is any more dangerous than eating non-genetically modified foods.

According to Patrick Bateson, vice-president and biological secretary of the Royal Society, "We have examined the results of published research [on GM food] and have found nothing to indicate that GM foods are inherently unsafe. If credible evidence does exist that GM foods are more harmful to people than non-GM foods, we should like to know why it has not been made public."

Genetically modified food would ensure that crops each year produce more, are less likely to fall victim to pests and disease while and mature more quickly. This means a larger crop with quicker turnaround, which would feed more people at a cheaper price. Also, some of these plants have higher levels of vitamins, such as vitamin A, which would significantly combat malnutrition in third world countries. It's a no-brainer.

Another point against genetically modified foods is that they are not being labeled properly. I do not have any problem against modifying foods, but I do have a problem with not sharing that information with consumers. I do support clearly labeling genetically modified foods so that consumers can choose if they want to eat it or not.

Finally, and this is the point that is so often forgotten in the debate on modified foods, but people have been modifying plants since the time of the agricultural revolution. As hunter-gathers made the transition to farmers, they began to sort out the weak plants and keep the strong ones. The stronger plants were bred with the other strong plants, creating more and more fruitful plants as the generations passed. This is, in its simplest form, genetic modification—picking out the strong genes while casting out the weak genes. If it weren't for genetically modified foods, society would not exist as we know it now.

Genetically modified foods are not the enemy—a lack of education and blind belief in loud and angry hippies is. There are too many people on earth dying from lack of food for us to attack those who try and supply it to them.

Modified foods: biologically messy

Joanne Bergstrom
The Clackamas Print

Neither our country nor the rest of the world have the laws, science or wisdom needed to safely execute a process as powerful and lasting as genetic engineering.

Combining species by inserting animal genes into plants or plant genes into animals is very different from selecting traits as we have done in the past. Up until now, if we made a mess or a mistake we could just clean it up. Living things obey biological laws; they reproduce. We really don't yet know what we are capable of setting into motion.

The worst part about it is that we are doing it for money rather than humanity. Plus it is being done in secret, giving the public no choice as to what they eat.

Bowing to public opinion, the farmers that supply milk for the Tillamook Cheese Cooperative recently voted to stop using, rBST, a genetically engineered product that increases milk production. They aren't even allowed to display that information on their label for fear of a lawsuit by Monsanto Corporation.

Photo illustration by Jeff Sorenson Clackamas Print

Monsanto owns most of the patents on genetically engineered plants. Although more than 40 genetically modified crops are currently allowed in the United States, corn, cotton, soybeans and canola are their major crops. And two traits, herbicide tolerance and insect resistance, make up almost all of the present seeds on the market. Here's how it works:

By making a crop resistant to a certain herbicide, we could then spray with that herbicide to kill everything except the resistant plant.

The second strategy is to breed insecticide into each cell of the plant. When the bugs eat it, they die. Then you eat it or feed it to animals, and whatever part isn't eaten is plowed back into the earth.

So what happens when the pollen of this herbicide-resistant plant blows over into the next field and combines with weeds or your neighbor's crop? You get herbicide-resistant weeds and genetically polluted crops.

A recent Environmental Protection Agency study done on a test farm in Oregon found pollen spores 13 miles away from the originally modified plant.

Also, the plant itself that you have just modified can become a weed. If it is stronger than the surrounding plants, it can just take over.

Another use of genetic engineering is to insert genes into plants to produce pharmaceuticals. This also could be hard to contain, and the prospect of eating someone else's heart medicine in your morning cornflakes, for instance, is pretty scary.

Although there is the promise of increasing food yields for the Third World, there isn't much profit in that. The free exchange of seeds and technology that led to crop and animal breeding doesn't exist anymore, as we have begun to patent intellectual property. Now information is impeded by patents held not only by companies, but also by universities.

A crop called golden rice, for example, has been developed to help combat a vitamin A deficiency that blinds hundreds of thousands of children each year. It never came to market because its developers needed permission from more than 40 patent or contract holders.

In fact, Third World farmers are opposed to the "Terminator" gene that the Monsanto wants to insert into their products. Seeds would become sterile after one growing season, and farmers would have to buy new seeds each year instead of replanting the old ones. Imagine what could happen if that pollen escaped into the general plant population!

Until we really have the biological and ecological understanding that we need for such ventures, as well as the laws in place to benefit humanity, maybe the genie is best left in the bottle.

Student Poll:

What do you think about genetically engineered food?

"I think eventually it will screw us up. It is bad, but I eat it anyway."

Brad Thomas

"It does not really matter to me, but I can see the harm in it."

Jacque Stone

"I don't like them; I prefer organic foods."

Nemah Delai

"I need some more details about how it affects health."

Judy Peabody

"It's all the same to me as long as it's edible."

Phillip Drake

"I think it's unnatural."

Melissa Irvin

This week's poll compiled by Joanne Bergstrom and Shannon Armstead