

ROLE OF GENETICALLY MODIFIED CROPS IN AGRICULTURE

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Genetically-modified crops (GM foods) have made a big splash in the news lately. European environmental organizations and public interest groups have been actively protesting against GM foods for months, and recent controversial studies about the effects of genetically-modified corn pollen on monarch butterfly caterpillars 1,2 have brought the issue of genetic engineering to the forefront of the public consciousness in the U.S. In response to the up swelling of public concern, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) held three open meetings in Chicago, Washington, D.C., and Oakland, California to solicit public opinions and begin the process of establishing a new regulatory procedure for government approval of GM foods.3 I attended the FDA meeting held in November 1999 in Washington, D.C., and here I will attempt to summarize the issues involved and explain the U.S. government’s present role in regulating GM food.

What are genetically-modified crop?: The term GM foods or GMOs (genetically-modified organisms) is most commonly used to refer to crop plants created for human or animal consumption using the latest molecular biology techniques. These plants have been modified in the laboratory to enhance desired traits such as increased resistance to herbicides or improved nutritional content. The enhancement of desired traits has traditionally been

undertaken through breeding, but conventional plant breeding methods can be very time consuming and are often not very accurate. Genetic engineering, on the other hand, can create plants with the exact desired trait very rapidly and with great accuracy. For example, plant



geneticists can isolate a gene responsible for drought tolerance and insert that gene into a different plant. The new genetically-modified plant will gain drought tolerance as well. Not only can genes be transferred from one plant to another, but genes from non-plant organisms also can be used. The best known example of this is the use of Bt. genes in corn and other crops. Bt. or *Bacillus thuringiensis*, is a naturally

occurring bacterium that produces crystal proteins that are lethal to insect larvae. Bt. crystal protein genes have been transferred into corn, enabling the corn to produce its own pesticides against insects such as the European corn borer.

What are some of the advantages of GM foods?: The world population has topped 6 billion people and is predicted to double in the next 50 years. Ensuring an adequate food supply for this booming population is going to be a major challenge in the years to come. GM foods promise to meet this need in a number of ways:

- Pest resistance Crop losses from insect pests can be staggering, resulting in devastating financial loss for farmers and starvation in developing countries. Farmers typically use many tons of chemical pesticides annually. Consumers do not wish to eat food that has been treated with pesticides because of potential health hazards, and run-off of agricultural wastes from excessive use of pesticides and fertilizers can poison the water supply and cause harm to the environment. Growing GM foods such as Bt. corn can help eliminate the application of chemical pesticides and reduce the cost of bringing a crop to market.

- Herbicide tolerance For some crops, it is not cost-effective to remove weeds by physical means such as tilling, so farmers will often spray large quantities of different herbicides (weed-killer) to destroy weeds, a

Table 1 : Area under GM crops in Mega countries>50,000 during 2003

USA	42.8 million
Argentina	13.9 million
Canada	4.4 million
Brazil	3.0 million
China	2.8 million
South Africa	0.4 million
Australia	0.10 million
India	0.10 million
Romania	>0.05 million
Uruguay	>0.05

time-consuming and expensive process, that requires care so that the herbicide doesn't harm the crop plant or the environment. Crop plants genetically-engineered to be resistant to one very powerful herbicide could help prevent environmental damage by reducing the amount of herbicides needed. For example, Monsanto has created a strain of soybeans genetically modified to be not affected by their herbicide product Roundup →.6 A farmer grows these soybeans which then only require one application of weed-killer instead of multiple applications, reducing production cost and limiting the dangers of agricultural waste run-off.

– Disease resistance There are many viruses, fungi and bacteria that cause plant diseases. Plant biologists are working to create plants with genetically-engineered resistance to these diseases.

– Cold tolerance Unexpected frost can destroy sensitive seedlings. An antifreeze gene from cold water fish has been introduced into plants such as tobacco and potato. With this antifreeze gene, these plants are able to tolerate cold temperatures that normally would kill unmodified seedlings.¹⁰ (Note: I have not been able to find any journal articles or patents that involve fish antifreeze proteins in strawberries, although I have seen such reports in newspapers. I can only conclude that nothing on this application has yet been published or patented.)

– Drought tolerance/salinity tolerance As the world population grows and more land is utilized for housing instead of food production, farmers will need to grow crops in locations previously unsuited for plant cultivation. Creating plants that can withstand long periods of drought or high salt content in soil and groundwater will help people to grow crops in formerly inhospitable places.

– Nutrition Malnutrition is common in third world countries where impoverished peoples rely on a single crop such as rice for the main staple of their diet. However, rice does not contain adequate amounts of all necessary nutrients to prevent malnutrition. If rice could be genetically engineered to contain additional vitamins

and minerals, nutrient deficiencies could be alleviated. For example, blindness due to vitamin A deficiency is a common problem in third world countries. Researchers at the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology Institute for Plant Sciences have created a strain of “golden” rice containing an unusually high content of beta-carotene (vitamin A). Since this rice was funded by the Rockefeller Foundation,¹⁴ a non-profit organization, the Institute hopes to offer the golden rice seed free to any third world country that requests it. Plans were underway to develop a golden rice that also has increased iron content. However, the grant that funded the creation of these two rice strains was not renewed, perhaps because of the vigorous anti-GM food protesting in Europe, and so this nutritionally-enhanced rice may not come to market at all.

– Pharmaceuticals Medicines and vaccines often are costly to produce and sometimes require special storage conditions not readily available in third world countries. Researchers are working to develop edible vaccines in tomatoes and potatoes. These vaccines will be much easier to ship, store and administer than traditional injectable vaccines.

– Phytoremediation Not all GM plants are grown as crops. Soil and groundwater pollution continues to be a problem in all parts of the world. Plants such as poplar trees have been genetically engineered to clean up heavy metal pollution from contaminated soil.

What are some of the criticisms against GM foods?: Environmental activists, religious organizations, public interest groups, professional associations and other scientists and government officials have all raised concerns about GM foods, and criticized agribusiness for pursuing profit without concern for potential hazards, and the government for failing to exercise adequate regulatory oversight. It seems that everyone has a strong opinion about GM foods. Even the Vatican¹⁹ and the Prince of Wales²⁰ have expressed their opinions. Most concerns about GM foods fall into three categories: environmental hazards, human health risks, and economic concerns.



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