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U.S. says GM foods the solution to world hunger

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SACRAMENTO, Calif. — An international biotechnology conference began Monday with the U.S. agriculture secretary hailing genetically modified food as a tool to reduce global hunger and demonstrators outside decrying it as a health threat.

Eleven protesters were arrested as more than 1,500 people marched in the streets of the state capital at the start of the three-day event. Secretary of Agriculture Ann Veneman told agriculture ministers, scientists and health care experts from 120 countries that biotechnology can help developing countries reduce hunger while improving nutrition and their economies.

"Biotechnology is already helping both small and large-scale farmers around the world by boosting yields, lowering costs, reducing pesticide use and making crops more resistant to disease, pests and drought," Veneman said.

Demonstrators claim biotechnology is not the antidote to complex global food problems and say the conference is a means for the United States to lower trade barriers and expand the use of genetically altered crops.

They rallied on the steps of the state Capitol under the scrutiny of hundreds of police and California Highway Patrol officers and then spread out through downtown. Eleven protesters were arrested by midafternoon, said Sgt. Jim Jarofick, who had no information on possible charges.

Demonstrators included chefs in aprons and white hats banging utensils on saucepans, as well as activists dressed as giant ears of corn, butterflies and tomatoes. Protesters carried large puppets, signs such as "Feed the needy, not the greedy," and trumpeted urban food programs, veganism and organic farming.

The conference, sponsored by the Agriculture Department, is focusing on farming methods, irrigation and pest management to help developing countries cut world hunger by 2015, a goal set by agriculture secretaries at the World Food Summit last year. More than 800 million people face chronic hunger or malnutrition.

The debate over genetically modified foods is intensifying, with the United States demanding that the World Trade Organization force the European Union to end its ban on genetically modified food. EU ministers did not attend the conference.

http://www.ctv.ca/servlet/ArticleNews/story/CTVNews/1056417137553_52///?hub=World

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Commentary

The problem with the arguments being run by both sides in this debate is they are both half right.

The US Administration, propelled by commercial interests and the American enthusiasm for all things new and technological, fervently believe that agri-biotechnology is the answer to feeding the world. If farmers in poor countries can increase their productivity, they will be better off. Producing more from the same area with the same or fewer inputs will empower them to rise above subsistence farming and become ‘commercial’ producers, selling their excess production into the domestic market.

It is very easy to be convinced of the merits of a ‘silver bullet’ fix to a complex problem. We all have a natural tendency toward looking for simple answers to complex issues. The productivity argument is a very persuasive because it is simple. If you can produce more food, then more people can eat more food and less people will go hungry. This is the basic element of the US argument.

Agri-biotechnology is spoken of as the harbinger of the second Green Revolution. But simply throwing a new technology at a complex matrix of environmental, social, commercial and political issues does not do justice to the changes the Green Revolution heralded almost 50 years ago.

Modern commercial food and fibre production didn’t just develop overnight by throwing new technology at farms. The foundation stones of the Green Revolution *included* crop chemicals and fertilisers, but there were a whole lot of other factors of equal importance, including plant and animal breeding advances, new machinery, more efficient transportation and storage, better education and information systems and, most importantly, the investment required to fund the changes.

Modern food production systems have *evolved* over the last half-century by adapting technology and incorporating it into existing systems. We have to remember that the levels of productivity in many less developed countries are similar to those of western agriculture of 30 or more years ago and closing the gap will require most, if not all, of the elements mentioned above.

Recent experience in Zimbabwe illustrates just how fragile commercial agriculture can be. In that country management and scale was removed and productivity collapsed almost overnight. The technology still exists, (chemicals, fertilisers, machinery) but the knowledge and capability to apply it has gone.

Technology requires infrastructure to support it. Simply adding another layer of advanced technology onto systems that are poorly equipped to deal with the technology they already have is asking for trouble. Misuse or overuse of crop chemicals in the third world, primarily due to poorly educated farmers, is a major social and environmental problem. What if agri-biotechnologies are introduced into production systems that can't support them and they fail? Like it or not, GM crops require more sophisticated management than non-GM varieties. Does this level of management sophistication currently exist in the third world?

Agri-biotechnology will play an important role in alleviating the plight of poor farmers in third world countries, but it should be considered as another tool in a range of production system enhancements required to raise productivity and sustainability, not as 'The Answer' to all the problems that exist in these countries.

Agri-biotechnology standing alone will not provide the answers to the questions being discussed at the international biotechnology conference in California. History shows us that technology can be a very fragile thing when it is not supported by an appropriate infrastructure.

On the other side of the coin, the anti agri-biotechnology protestors are wrong to dismiss the positive role that agri-biotechnology can play in the third world.

There are already examples where GM crops are having a positive social and environmental effect. In India, Bt cotton has improved yields, reduced the reliance on pesticides and boosted prosperity. If you ask an Indian cotton farmer growing Bt cotton if he wants to go back to growing non Bt varieties he will surely tell you no. Similar outcomes can be expected when other GM crops are introduced to these areas.

But simply increasing productivity is not the answer. It is a fact that there is more than enough food produced in the world every day to provide adequate nutrition to the worlds 6 billion people. It is also a fact that the farming and trade policies of the two biggest players in global food and fibre, the US and the EU, are responsible for more damage to the third world – and thus more hunger – than all of the other factors combined.

Too much common ground to agree?

And that is the problem. The answer lies in a combination of the arguments of *both* sides.

To say that agri-biotechnology is *the* answer is only half right. It is part of *an* answer. Agri-biotechnology will play an important role in enhancing the productivity of third world food and fibre production. But the technology cannot be considered as a single bullet. The technology must be supported down on the farm and at the macro level with trade reform and the removal of subsidies in the 'first world'.

And the opponents of agri-biotechnology are only half right when they say that hunger for 800 million people can be eliminated through trade policy reform and other means. Reform of this sort has to be undertaken because it is one of the keys to allowing third world food and fibre production to compete on fair economic terms with developed countries. But they are wrong when they dismiss the positive contribution that agri-biotechnology can make to food and fibre production in the third world.

We must also be mindful of the economics of GM crops. Results from comparisons strongly indicate that there are economic advantages. Where the technology is being used it is starting to give an economic edge. It may be a simple economic fact the third world *have* to adopt GM crops to compete, lest they be condemned to a continuing cycle of un-competitiveness, poverty and hunger.

Now that the 'gene genie' is out of the bottle there is no turning back from the economic consequences.

Some final words on the economics from Africa.

"Access to modern food technology is critically important for African families trying to grow their own food, especially during a three-year drought in Africa that has drastically cut farm production and caused food shortages or outright famine for 16 million people in 25 countries," said Florence Wambugu, Kenyan scientist and founder of A Harvest Biotech Foundation International.

"Using genetic tools to make crops more resistant to pests and weeds and, in the future, more able to withstand drought or thrive in marginal soils, can help improve productivity," said Wambugu. "And because this technology is available in a seed, it can be useful to small-scale farmers who lack machinery and access to other farm inputs."

South African farmer Thandiwe Myyeni began planting genetically modified cotton in 1999. "Since I began to plant Bt cotton, I've been able to increase production 30 to 50 percent on my 10 hectares and spend less time working in the field," she said. "With my additional income, I've remodeled my kitchen, purchased a new tractor and I'm able to spend more time with my four children."

Speaking for the farmers themselves, Peter Rammutla, president of the National African Farmers Union, which represents 250,000 small-scale farmers in South Africa, asked and answered a basic question. "Why are we here? We are catching a moving train -- a moving train that is globalization," he said. "Africa needs the opportunity to access this technology and assess its potential."

(WASHINGTON FILE 24 June 2003 - Sarah Bloxham - *African Farmers Need and Want Access to Biotechnology)*