



Food Politics

WHAT'S SO BAD ABOUT GMOS?

by Maria Noël Groves & Shane Smith

With all the hubbub around genetically modified organisms (GMOs) and Right to Know labeling, you might be wondering, "Why do I care? What's so bad about GMOs, anyway?" The primary issue from the Co-op's standpoint is that our buyers and customers should be able to easily identify foods that contain GMOs and be able to make the choice whether or not to buy them. GMOs involve splicing totally different genes into crops and have been in the food system without Americans' consent for quite some time. Right now, you can only be sure a food is free of GMOs if it's certified organic or has gone through the process of non-GMO verification, both of which cost more money and lead to a higher price point on products. That said, here are some reasons to be concerned:

Increased Herbicide Use: It's true that a handful of GMO crops – papaya, sweet peppers, and zucchini – are designed to be resistant to problematic diseases, which may reduce farmers' reliance on pesticides while improving yields. However, the bulk of GMO crops covering our globe – alfalfa, canola, corn, soy, sugar beets, and wheat – are bred to be resistant to herbicides like Monsanto's glyphosate Round-Up. This means that farmers can control weeds with heavy applications of toxic herbicides without killing the crop itself. These herbicides have known safety concerns to humans and the environment "living downstream" from the farm and from residues left on the crops.

Human Safety: GMO proponents speak of "golden rice's" potential to prevent blindness in third-world countries; however, this crop has yet to make it into the ground, and the majority of GMO crops in use are herbicide-resistant crops. Research on other aspects of human safety with GMOs is highly controversial. Concerns have been raised that GMOs may aggravate allergic responses, damage specific body systems, and increase cancer risk.

Environmental Effects: The increased use of herbicides

with herbicide-resistant GMOs can lead to reduced soil and water quality and toxicity to fish, amphibians, and other animals. Scientists also question the effects of GMOs on important insects like bees and butterflies. Thanks to genetic drift, GMO genes can contaminate unintended crops and self-seed themselves in new places. And, the conventional farming world's intense herbicide use has created an emerging group of herbicide-resistant superweeds plaguing farm country.

Farmer Wellbeing: When GMO crops "drift" and pollinate neighboring organic and non-GMO conventional crops, farmers find themselves in a precarious predicament. First, these farmers may experience a loss because they can't sell the crops as certified organic, nor can they sell their foods to countries that have banned GMOs. Secondly, because the biotech companies do not allow farmers to plant (or replant) GMO seeds without paying for them, Monsanto has famously and aggressively persecuted the farmers affected by genetic drift for illegally infringing on Monsanto's patent rights. Last May, the U.S. Supreme Court sided with Monsanto in its ability to sue farmers. Even GMO farmers can experience hardships with a cycle farming that requires purchasing new seeds and herbicides every year, especially if yields don't meet expectations.

Squelching Seed Freedom: Just six companies – Du Pont, Mitsui, Monsanto, Syngent, Aventis and Dow – reportedly own 98 percent of the world's seeds. While not all of these seeds are GMO, the biotech seed companies are at the forefront of GMO seed production, and they spend millions fighting Right to Know legislation. Proponents of heirloom, organic, and traditional seed saving techniques question the ethics and safety of such a seed monopoly.

A Matter of Philosophy: GMOs go beyond simple hybrids and cross-pollination. They do not and cannot occur naturally. Are humans sophisticated enough to comprehend the impacts of messing with nature on such a fundamental level? Many feel that the push for GMOs (and against labeling or more rigorous testing) comes almost entirely from big business' desire for profits, not true in the interest of human health or the environment. ■



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