

Give GM Foods A Go

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Australian Financial Review 18th January, 2000

The green/consumerist radicals had great sport last year in demonising genetically modified foods. They catapulted GM foods into one of the celebrated causes at the World Trade Organisation meeting in Seattle. And prior to Seattle they managed to create public alarm with none-too-subtle images of "Frankenfoods" and claims that genetically modified tomatoes were really pigs in disguise.

There was no substance behind the fear-mongering, as scientific advisers told their political masters. Even so, politicians in Australia and many other countries were spooked into contemplating draconian regulatory measures to control GM products.

And the radicals claimed the scalp of Monsanto, the firm most associated with biotechnology and food. The NGOs organised an internet attack to undermine the value of the Monsanto brand name, forcing a sale of its GM division.

Data now becoming available is showing productivity from GM products falling short of Green Revolution breakthroughs but still allowing valuable improvements. The increased yield for the two main GM crops in the US, corn and cotton, averages 6% and 11% respectively. Some nations can afford to forego such gains but Australia, with agriculture providing 30 per cent of exports must remain in the vanguard of competitiveness and cannot reject technology to improve agricultural productivity.

Issues of productivity aside, the built-in insecticides at the core of most GM products is leading to reduced use of agricultural chemicals. US studies show chemical spraying for GM crops fell by 14% for corn and a massive 72% for cotton. This is a major commercial saving---pest control accounts for 12% of the costs of producing cotton. And, of course lower levels of spraying pay an environmental dividend. When confronted with this evidence, the radicalised environmental groups have buried their heads in the sand rather than risk alienating some of their support base by praising business innovation.

In assaulting genetic engineering the radical lobby steered clear of attacking genetically modified products used in medicines. The public would just not buy that. Some GM medicines that are clear improvements on the "natural" products are already around. These include the drug to combat growth hormone deficiency, which previously resulting in premature deaths when it was derived from a "natural" source, the pituitary glands of corpses.

Currently, the improved productivity from GM crops is difficult for consumers to translate into tangible benefits as the lower price is not apparent. Consumer views will change as improved new GM products in the pipeline are brought to market. These include:

- * Vitamin A enriched rice which will reduce the annual death and blindness toll in children with Vitamin A deficiency;
- * the elimination of a natural allergenic protein in milk that prevents many children from consuming the product;
- * eggs with high levels of peptides to allow healthier weight reduction.

The first round of GM improvements to agricultural products came without visible improvement to the consumer. Scaremongers had a field day pushing the fear buttons. With subsequent rounds of technology developments, quality improvements will add to the productivity gains. Significant public opposition to GM products will disappear just like it has to the products of selective breeding that form the bulk of our present diet.

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