Of Famine and Food Aid: GM Food Internationally

A new and somber aspect of the global debate about the acceptability of GM foods came to international attention when a number of African countries suffering famine recently refused U.S. food aid because it included genetically modified (GM) corn.

Up to now, much of the international debate about GM foods has been located primarily in developed nations — principally the United States and the European Union (EU), where GM foods face widespread consumer opposition.

But the debate over GM foods has now been exported to a very different situation. As many as 14 million people in southern Africa currently face starvation as a result of drought, the AIDS epidemic and political strife. To assist these starving countries, the U.S. and other nations sent food aid in hopes of preventing widespread famine. The U.S. food aid program uses commodity corn, which typically includes some of the GM corn grown widely in the U.S. But three of the African countries to which food aid was sent — Zimbabwe, Mozambique, and Zambia — initially rejected U.S. corn because of fears about its safety and environmental impacts.

Zimbabwe and Mozambique have now accepted the U.S. aid, but, at this writing, Zambia has refused the shipments even though officials and scientists from the United Nation's World Food Program (WFP), the U.N. Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), the United States and the European Union have assured officials in Zambian President Levy Mwanawasa's government that the food is safe.

"As a U.N. agency, we aren't going to tell people what to do," says Charles Riemenschneider of FAO. "We can enlighten people who have concerns about what the issues are, but we don't tell sovereign countries what to do. You have to weigh the needs of 13 million starving people before you rule out GM foods out of hand."

The situation highlights the global ambivalence over a technology that some have touted as a tool to end world hunger and others have disparaged as providing no benefits to consumers while posing significant risks to the environment. At the same time, it may mark a turning point in the global viewpoint about GM foods. A big question remains whether non-European countries will accept the technology or have the same reservations prevalent in Europe.

Industry has a significant uphill battle — they've gotten wise to the fact that Europe is lost and they are fighting an uphill battle for the rest of the world," says Mark Mansour, a partner with Kellerman and Heckman LLP who practices international trade law specializing in foods, pharmaceuticals and dietary supplements.

Mansour notes that a significant difference between the U.S. and the EU is the fact that the EU has espoused the "precautionary principle" as a means for determining whether a food is safe enough to eat. The precautionary principle states that when an activity raises threats of human harm to health or environment, precautionary measures should be taken even if cause and effect has not been scientifically established. One of the problems Mansour sees with the precautionary principle is that it requires scientific certainty that there will be no harm before moving ahead — a standard that Mansour says is insupportable and not based on good science.

Mansour says the Zambian food crisis and what he sees as the growing worldwide acceptance of the precautionary principle give the impression that the world is against GM food. However, he says, "The reality is a little more complex."

The complexity and the urgency of the issue were on display at the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg, South Africa in early September. Though GM food issues weren't on the formal agenda, the debate over GM foods played a pivotal role at the summit in light of the food aid crisis. The summit even featured different groups of farmers from the developing world supporting and protesting biotech foods.

"Biotechnology wasn't even part of the formal agenda for the summit," says summit attendee Pat Mooney, Executive Director of the Action Group on Erosion, Technology and Concentration (ETC Group). "But, it was everywhere and hotly debated. I think there was a general sense that the North Americans are pushing hard to get GM everywhere."

Val Giddings, vice president for Food and Agriculture with the Biotechnology Industry Organization (BIO) attended the summit and agrees that biotech was an important part of that meeting, however, he vehemently opposes the view that North America is somehow foisting GM crops on the rest of the world. "This technology reduces their costs, increases their profits, and reduces environmental concerns. That is why farmers around the globe who have access to this technology are snapping it up," Giddings said.

The reluctance of some southern African governments to accept GM corn does not provide a complete picture of developing countries' attitudes about biotechnology. In Africa, Ethiopia is wary of GM while Kenya, its neighbor to the south, is actively pursuing the technology as a means to increase food security.

"It is unwise to deny the developing world the opportunity to use biotechnology," says Frank Kiriswa, a former agricultural scientist and First Secretary Economic/Political Section at the U.S. Embassy of the Republic of Kenya. "The opportunity for us to try this technology should be available."

Kiriswa is equally adamant that any efforts to develop the technology for the developing world require close
interactions between the government, non-governmental organizations, scientists and farmers. Such a collaboration in Kenya has resulted in a GM sweet potato that is resistant to a devastating virus.

Hope Shand, of the ETC Group, agrees with Kiriswa's notion that any progression of GM for the developing world should be collaborative, but she notes it is unlikely to occur because patents for the technology are held by five multinational corporate entities.

"The countries of the developing world need to be the ones to determine their own research agenda," Shand says. "But, if they cannot get access to the basic enabling technology, how are they going to do that?"

In addition, Shand notes a number of countries lack the regulatory expertise to appropriately deal with the introduction of biotech crops. According to Shand, in the absence of any direct consumer benefits and only marginal benefits to farmers, it's not surprising the world is wary about the technology. "The U.S. and the biotechnology industry have been desperate to show benefits of this technology. Now, they are trying to sell the product by giving it away."

Around the world, governments are taking very different approaches to biotechnology. As previously mentioned in Africa, Ethiopia is wary of GM foods while Kenya supports them. In South America, Argentina has embraced GM crops while Brazil hasn't approved any. China is actively pursuing its own GM crops and India has just approved GM cotton. More than 30 countries currently require labeling of GM foods. Australia and New Zealand have enacted GM labeling laws. The requirements for the label will impact whether there is a market for various GM crops.

Europe is considering finalizing one of the strictest labeling standards requiring labels if more than 1 percent of the ingredients in processed foods are GM. It is that labeling standard that the Zambian government is pointing to in its refusal to accept U.S. food aid.

The Zambian government has said it is concerned that farmers will plant the corn and it would cross-pollinate with non-GM corn planted in Zambia. Should that happen, the government is worried that it couldn't meet the European standards and would be unable to export surplus crops to Europe when the drought is over. Milling the corn before it's distributed would make it impossible to plant, averted the contamination problem. However, the government is still refusing the corn even if it is milled.

The situation has frustrated U.S. government officials. Secretary of Agriculture Ann M. Veneman berated anti-biotech environmental organizations, which she said in an August 30th statement, has hindered understanding of the technology. In that statement she notes: "It is disgraceful that instead of helping hungry people, these individuals and organizations are embarking on an irresponsible campaign to spread misinformation and create an atmosphere of fear, which has led countries in dire need of food to turn away safe, wholesome food."

Veneman's sentiment is shared by Bernd Halling, of EuropaBio. "We have the luxury to pay too much for our food," he says. "Developing countries just can't. And, it's irresponsible to tell countries to deny food aid in the face of famine."

Halling says that the green lobby has "built up this GMO issue to the point that it is illogical. [The famine in Africa] is the first issue that has the ability to destroy their credibility. In this case they overdid it. I want to know if they are going to accept responsibility for the people that will die as a result of the refusal of GM aid," said Halling.

For more information, please visit the United States Department of Agriculture; the U.N. Food and Agriculture Organization; Keller & Heckman; the ETC Group; the Biotechnology Industry Organization; and EuropaBio online.

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