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Europeans Gag on Modified Foods

By JEREMY RIFKIN

In case you thought the Bush administration's rift with our European allies ended with the Iraq war, think again. Now the White House has set its sights on something far more personal and potentially explosive: the question of what kind of food Europeans should put on their tables.

In a recent speech, President Bush charged that the European Union's ban on genetically modified food was discouraging developing countries from growing GM crops for export, thereby

U.S. push for genetically altered crops is reaping resentment.

hurting their economies and resulting in increased hunger and poverty.

The U.S. government also launched a formal legal challenge at the World Trade Organization to force the European Union to accept GM seeds and food in Europe. For most Europeans, genetically modified food is anathema. Although they are worried about the potential harmful environmental and health consequences that might flow from introducing GM food, they are equally concerned about the cultural consequences.

In Europe, food and culture are deeply entwined. Every region boasts its own culinary traditions and touts its local products, from balsamic vinegar in Modena, Italy, to fine French wine from Bordeaux. In a world of globalizing forces, increasingly controlled by corporate behemoths, impersonal governing bodies and bureaucratic regulatory regimes, the last vestige of cultural identity most Europeans feel they have some control over is their choice of food.

The White House has made a bad situation even worse by suggesting that European opposition to genetically modified food is tantamount to imposing a death sentence for millions of starving people in the Third World.

Denying poor farmers in the developing countries a European market for GM food, the White House says, gives them no choice but to grow non-GM food and lose the many commercial advantages that go with growing GM crops.

To begin with, hunger in the Third World is a complex phenomenon that is not likely to be reversed by GM food crops. About 80% of the undernourished children in the developing world live in countries with food surpluses. The hunger problem has more to do with the way arable land is utilized. In many developing countries, more than one-third of the grain is being grown for livestock. The animals, in turn, will be eaten by the world's wealthiest consumers. Meanwhile, the poorest people are left with little land to grow food for their own families. And, even if land is available, it is often owned by global agribusiness interests.

Second, Bush talks about the great cost savings of planting GM crops. What he conveniently ignores is that GM seeds are far more expensive than conventional seeds and, because they are patented, farmers cannot save the new seeds at harvest for replanting because they belong to the biotech companies.

Third, the introduction of crops laced with genes that produce everything from herbicide tolerance to antibodies for genital herpes to drugs to treat cystic fibrosis and Alzheimer's disease raises serious environmental questions. And we don't know what happens to insects, birds and animals that ingest plant materials containing these substances. Then there is the potential for pollen containing exotic new gene traits mixing with non-GM food crops and native weeds, creating a new kind of bioengineered pollution.

And what about the human health implications? Last December, the U.S. Department of Agriculture ordered the incineration of 500,000 bushels of soybeans that were to be used in products like ice cream and baby food. They had been mistakenly mixed in a silo containing corn genetically engineered to produce a vaccine against pig diarrhea. Until this vaccine has been tested on humans, there is no way to know if it is safe for human consumption.

U.S. strong-arming can't make Europeans eat genetically modified food. In the unfolding struggle between global commercial power and local cultural resistance, the GM food fight might turn out to be the critical test case that forces us to rethink the very basis of the globalization process.

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