



Don't ignore the risks

Opposing view: Genetically engineered foods threaten health, environment.

By Jeremy Rifkin

Genetically engineered foods pose serious potential long-term risks to the environment and public health. Monsanto, Dupont, Novartis and other life-science companies argue that the new gene-splicing techniques they are using are merely a more sophisticated extension of classical breeding techniques. That's not true. In classical breeding, researchers can cross close relatives within common families to create new strains and breeds. With recombinant DNA technology, however, genes from totally unrelated species can be inserted into the genetic makeup of animals and plants in ways that have never before been possible.

Human-growth-hormone genes have been inserted into the genetic code of rats, and antifreeze genes from flounder have been inserted into tomatoes, fundamentally altering their biological makeup.

Already, much of our corn and soy is genetically engineered. These food crops contain herbicide-tolerant and pest-resistant genes. New scientific studies, however, show

that these genes easily flow in pollen to surrounding fields. What happens when wild weeds take up these genes and become tolerant of herbicides and resistant to insects?

Insurance companies are unwilling to extend liability coverage to insure against the long-term catastrophic spread of "genetic pollution" because no science exists by which to judge the potential risks. Who, then, will pay the costs of spreading genetic pollution? Farmers? Consumers? Taxpayers?

Finally, genetically modified (GM) food could create allergenic and toxic reactions if consumed. Even the Food and Drug Administration's own scientific advisers have warned — in internal documents — of the potentially ill effects on health of consuming exotic genes contained in GM foods. Should consumers be made the ultimate guinea pigs in this radical food experiment?

Immediate mandatory labeling should be required for all of these GM foods. Even more important, we should legislate a ban on the introduction of all GM food crops into agricultural fields. The dangers are real and compelling, and too many questions remain unanswered. We ignore the risks at our peril.

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