

Policy Focus

Modifying the Truth: Alarmism about Genetically Modified Food

RECIPES FOR RATIONAL GOVERNMENT FROM THE INDEPENDENT WOMEN'S FORUM

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WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

Americans want a safe, secure and abundant food supply for themselves and for people around the world. Genetically modified (GM) food plays an important part in achieving that goal. Sadly, however, misinformation about GM food is causing needless alarm and fueling efforts to restrict its use.

Internationally, hunger remains a significant problem. An estimated 925 million people worldwide are currently undernourished; the vast majority (the United Nations estimates 98 percent) live in developing nations. Sixty percent of the world's hungry are women. A third of all childhood deaths in sub-Saharan Africa are due hunger-related diseases.

While not a panacea, GM food may offer some relief for people in developing nations by increasing crop yields and lowering the price of food. However, non-governmental organizations and some public health officials (both in the U.S. and internationally) are distorting the truth about GM products and discouraging agricultural progress.

Domestic opposition to GM food is also driving research dollars away from American educational institutions and private research facilities. As a result, American researchers are moving projects to other countries, like China and Brazil, where crop biotechnology is still supported.

The United States should lead on agriculture innovation and reap the economic benefits that will come with new products entering the marketplace. Continued fear mongering about GM products will only exacerbate America's economic problems and keep lifesaving GM food products from the hungry.

WHY YOU SHOULD CARE

GM food helps make food less expensive, more available and more nutritious, while protecting the environment.

- **Lowering Food Costs:** Crop technology allows scientists to modify simple foods so that vital, lifesaving nutrients can be provided to undernourished people around the world. Global food prices are already high and GM foods can help farmers produce a higher yield of crops, making food more abundant and less expensive.
- **Feeding the Hungry:** Today, millions around the world are malnourished. Hunger is expected to increase during the next decade; some estimate that by 2020, an extra 1.5 billion people will need to be fed. Crop biotechnology will be critical to providing this extra food.
- **Protecting the Environment:** GM technologies allow farmers to use fewer pesticides and generate more food from existing farmland with reduced erosion of topsoil.

Critics of GM food claim that GM products are dangerous, but hundreds of studies show them to be perfectly safe. We shouldn't allow alarmism to stop needed agricultural progress.

MORE INFORMATION

The Truth about Genetically Modified Food

Most Americans would be surprised to learn that they eat GM food regularly. That's because, currently, 88 percent of all corn and 94 percent of all soybeans produced in the U.S. are grown from genetically modified seeds. GM corn is converted into high fructose corn syrup which is used in myriad processed foods. [Around 90 cents of every dollar](#) that consumers use on groceries is spent on processed foods.

What is Genetically Modified Food?

GM Food is produced when the DNA of one organism is introduced into another organism to create a totally separate product. In 1994, the first GM food, called the [Flavr Savr tomato](#), was introduced on the commercial market for regular sale. This tomato was designed to delay the ripening process, remain firm when ripe, and resist rotting. The benefits are obvious: Conventional tomatoes are picked before ripening so that they can survive the shipping process, which results in a less flavorful tomato. Once on the shelves, conventionally grown tomatoes have a short shelf life.

The Flavr Savr tomatoes avoided these problems because they could ripen on the vine,

endure the shipping process, and remain on the shelf longer. While the Flavr Savr tomato is no longer on the market, GM food is ubiquitous today.

Is GM Food Safe?

Americans have been eating GM foods for over a decade and, to date, not one recorded case of injury has been reported due to GM food consumption. [Hundreds of studies attest to the safety of GM food](#), and the latest meta-study of 25 separate studies (examining five generations) found that GM food is [not a health hazard to humans](#). The study also found that the difference between GM and conventionally grown food is “[not statistically significant](#).” In 2001, European Union research commissioner Philippe Busquin [declared](#) that after fifteen years of tests in 400 European laboratories, the EU had not found “any new risks to human health or the environment, beyond the usual uncertainties of conventional plant breeding.”

A 2011 EU review of 81 separate European studies of genetically modified organisms found no evidence that GM food poses any new risks to human health or the environment. In May 2012, the European Food Safety Authority [rejected a proposed](#) ban on GM corn saying, “...there is no specific scientific evidence, in terms of risk to human and animal health or the environment.”

These separate studies have been supported by scientific and medical organizations around

the world, including the American Medical Association, the World Health Organization, the UN’s Food & Agriculture Organization, the Institute for Food Technologists and the American Dietetic Association, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA), the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA) and Food Safety Commission of Japan (FSCJ).

Unnecessary Regulations of GM Food

Despite GM food’s proven record of safety, activists and governments continue to call for onerous regulations to discourage its development and use.

For example, in 2012, anti-GM good activists introduced Proposition 37 in California, which would require businesses that sell food (such as grocery stores and convenience stores) to label food with GM ingredients. Prop. 37’s failure is good news for consumers who would have faced higher prices and for businesses that would have had to comply with crippling new regulations.

Walter Olson at the Cato Institute [notes](#) that this regulation would have hit California’s small business community particularly hard:

So suppose you’re a small neighborhood or ethnic grocer that handles, say, 2,000 food items. You’ll be out of compliance and vulnerable to losing a Prop 37 suit unless, for each and every one of them, you’ve made sure there’s either

1) a Prop 37 label on the product or 2) a sworn statement or certification in hand. If you find it hard to keep track of all these forms, or find that paperwork from small suppliers in other states or countries is sloppily filled out or unintelligible, you might want to ask your lawyer whether it's worth the risk to proceed. To make minor stock changes of the sort a grocer does every week — a new flavor of pita chip, bananas sourced from a different country — you'd better have the new forms in place ahead of time. If a clerk tops up the chickpea bin with five pounds of dried legumes for which you lack the origin paperwork, safer to toss the bin's entire contents — even if no GMO strains of chickpeas are in commercial circulation in the first place — lest someone demand certification.

In addition to the regulatory hassle, [businesses would have been vulnerable](#) to shakedown litigation because, according to California's independent and non-partisan Legislative Analyst Office, Proposition 37 allowed lawyers to “[sue without needing to demonstrate that any specific damage occurred as a result of the alleged violation](#).” No victim? No harm? No need to prove anything? That's the perfect set-up for lawyers looking for a payout.

California is not alone in advancing measures to limit or discourage the use of GM foods. Consider that in July 2000, [Time Magazine's cover](#) announced

that a new strain of GM rice — called Golden Rice — has the potential to save millions of children from the number one cause of preventable blindness: Vitamin A deficiency. Yet, more than ten years later, the problem persists. According to the World Health Organization, Vitamin A deficiency continues to affect about a third of the world's children under five.

The reason? Golden Rice has not yet been deployed to help the world's poor. That's because Golden Rice is still being tested to ensure the grain is safe for human consumption. Golden Rice's inventor even predicts that he will never see his invention used to help needy children, despite recent human trials that [showed](#) remarkable benefits among children who ate Golden Rice.

Other promising bio-technology products may face a similar fate: [Tomatoes](#) that can help unclog arteries, cows that produce allergy-free milk, [apples](#) that don't turn brown, so-called “[enviro pigs](#)” that are modified to produce less phosphorous in their feces and urine, and [salmon](#) that grow at an accelerating rate.

These are the products that will provide life-saving nutrients to the developing world, but only if the GM alarmists fail to succeed in removing them from the marketplace.

Fear of GM Food Stopping U.S. Research Dollar

Despite GM food's promising benefits, [according to the journal “Nature,”](#) since 1999, less than

0.1 percent of research grants from the US Department of Agriculture have been directed toward GM food. What explains this lack of funding for such promising scientific discovery?

The answer is simple: Food biotechnology has a public relations problem. [Nature](#) offers some good examples of the public's discomfort with GM food:

In one case, James Murray, another geneticist at the University of California, Davis, was told in 2003 that the USDA had rejected his proposal to develop a goat that produces milk rich in human lysozymes — enzymes that fight diarrhoeal disease — because the agency felt that “the general public would not accept such animals”.

[Alison] Van Eenennaam [geneticist at the University of California] once hoped to engineer a cow that produced milk rich in omega-3 fats, but the USDA rejected her proposals, and she ended the project because of a lack of funding.

The good news is that funding is still available in other countries. China, several South American counties, as well as some European countries continue to fund GM research.

What's Needed: Facts—Not Alarmism—on GM Food

Americans—in fact people everywhere—should be aware of the unnecessary burdens created by regulations and other restrictions designed

to discourage the use of safe GM food. They are preventing remedies to world-wide hunger and malnutrition problems that plague the developing world, as well as making food needlessly expensive for Americans. The effects of GM foods should continue to be studied. However, if the new products continue to be proven safe, then people should be free to make use of this progress.

French Study Debunked

In September 2012, French researcher Gilles-Eric Séralini released a study and video claiming to prove the dangers of GM food. The [video](#), featuring cancer-ridden rats, went viral. As a result, France threatened to ban imports of GM corn to the European Union (they later backed off the threat), and Russia did block imports of GM corn.

A month later, the Séralini study was exposed as junk science. Most notably, scientists discovered Séralini used Sprague-Dawley rats, a breed known to have a predisposition to tumors ([studies show](#) 88-96% develop tumors before age two), to guarantee the rats fed GM food would develop tumors.

Although the Séralini study is now dismissed, the damage has been done. A [study](#) on media coverage of GM food found that after increased reporting of the risks of GM food, people's perceptions of potential benefits “appeared to be permanently depressed.”

Once people hear negative stories about GM food, they are unlikely to be reassured of GM food's many benefits. Activists know this and use it to their advantage.

WHAT YOU CAN DO

You can help stop alarmism about genetically modified foods and end world hunger!

- **Get Informed:** To learn more visit:
 - [Independent Women's Forum](#)
 - [Genetic Literacy Project](#)
 - [SafeChemicalPolicy.org](#)
- **Talk to Your Friends:** Help your friends and family understand these important issues. Tell them about what's going on and encourage them to join you in getting involved.

- **Become a Leader in the Community:** Get a group together each month to talk about an issue (it will be fun!). Write a letter to the editor. Show up at local government meetings and make your opinions known. A few motivated people can change the world
- **Remain Engaged:** Too many good citizens see election time as the only time they need to pay attention to politics. We need everyone to pay attention and hold elected officials accountable. Let your representatives know your opinions. After all, they are supposed to work for you!

ABOUT THE INDEPENDENT WOMEN'S FORUM

The Independent Women's Forum (IWF) is dedicated to building support for free markets, limited government, and individual responsibility.

IWF, a non-partisan, 501(c)(3) research and educational institution, seeks to combat the too-common presumption that women want and benefit from big government, and build awareness of the ways that women are better served by greater economic freedom. By aggressively seeking earned media, providing easy-to-read, timely publications and commentary, and reaching out to the public, we seek to cultivate support for these important principles and encourage women to join us in working to return the country to limited, Constitutional government.

We rely on the support of people like you! Please visit us on our website www.iwf.org to get more information and consider making a donation to IWF.

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