Anderson: What are GMOs and why should you care?

Contributed by Andrea Anderson
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With the issue of a GE Free Zone ordinance in Lake County being put off time and time again, I thought I would take some time to explore some questions concerning the genetically modified organism (GMO) issue in hopes of raising awareness of the GMO monster which has been slowly and steadily creeping up on us from the shadows.

Biologists classify every living thing into four basic categories – Plantae, Animalia, Protista and Fungi. Since genetically modified organisms (or genetically engineered organisms) more often than not contain genes from several different kingdoms, they do not actually fall into any of these categories and therefore cannot technically be considered an animal, a plant, a protist or a fungi.

Are they simply freaks of nature? Well, that would imply that they were actually of nature. Yet, since nature has never combined the DNA of even two different kingdoms since the history of the planet, they can hardly be considered “of nature” at all. They are no more natural than the Frankenstein monster. Hence, they have been dubbed “Frankenfoods” by many. After examining the facts, I would dare say they are actually less natural than the Frankenstein monster and more accurately compared to the monstrous science experiments of Dr. Moreau which could not be categorized so easily.

So, really, what are they? Well, maybe, we should move on to the next question ...

Why should you care?

Since the government agencies such as the FDA, EPA and USDA have yet to be able to accurately define these GMOs, they have yet to be able to hold them to any standards of accurate research, testing or labeling. Instead, these GMOs are simply treated as “new inventions” which are then patented and passed on to the consumer as if they were just another product of a savvy company. Yet, these broad allowances have made for some fairly interesting developments.

For instance, baccilus thuringiensis (BT) is a bacteria often used as a pesticide. The genes from this bacteria (from the Monera Kingdom) are currently being introduced into food crops (from the Plantae Kingdom) used to create genetically modified food where the pesticide is no longer outside the plant but is now part of this new GMO’s DNA. However, because BT is considered a pesticide, and our foods are not required to be labeled with any pesticide information, this new GMO food is not required to be labeled to contain the genes of a pesticide within it. This creates a huge safety issue for the consumer, because genetic code cannot be scrubbed or washed off like other pesticides and can be consumed internally.

In the same vein, many plants we consider food crops are being genetically engineered to contain Glyphosate, a non specific systemic herbicide which allows resistance to pesticides. This means that our food crops can and very well may be sprayed even heavier with pesticides. Again, these GMOs are not required to be labeled, allowing for the possible consumption of pesticides.

And, even when the genes of the GMOs are simply coming from two sets of gene pools which are similar, there are potential hazards due to lack of a definition. For instance, when crops of soybeans were combined with genes of a brazil nut, the crop was still allowed to be referred to as soybeans, creating an issue for those consumers with nut allergies because the Brazil nut gene did not have to be legally mentioned in any labeling. With the current lack of accountability, biotech companies bear no responsibility towards the consumer concerning these GMOs, even if a consumer went into anaphylactic shock (a type of allergic reaction which can cause death), because legally they are not required to make these distinctions, due to lack of definition.

So, this brings me to the question, once again …

What are GMOs?

Maybe, the question we should be asking is – what purpose do they serve?

Many biotech companies would answer this question by telling you that GMOs are going to someday feed the world and end world hunger by producing “new and improved” genetically engineered crops. However, this could not be further from the truth. In fact, hunger is not a food issue but a political and social issue. When it comes down to it, the hunger problem the world faces is not in the creation of the food but in the systems of delivering the food. We are not having a food shortage, unless you consider the biotech industry’s attempt to patent many food crops as “new inventions” in an attempt to control our food supply through a “pay to plant” system which includes terminator seed which “terminates” (basically creating an unfertile plant) the seed after each season forcing growers to buy new seed every season.

And, in fact, even if you accidentally sow the patented seed or your seed is simply contaminated by their crop and it reproduces their seed, you can be held financially responsible by these companies. Several farmers in the U.S. and Canada have already realized this, thanks to being sued by Monsanto (one of the largest biotech companies in the world) for thousands of dollars.

This issue should weigh heavily, on the minds of many farmers. Particularly, it is a question of great importance, to organic farmers. From a business standpoint, we need to be asking what will become of the reputation of other farmers (as well as other businesses), if contamination occurs?

In the year 2000, many farmers found the answer, thanks to Aventis and their genetically modified Starlink corn.

Starlink corn was actually banned for human consumption in the U.S. because it could trigger symptoms adverse enough to land people in hospitals. Still, somehow, it found its way into the food supply.

In fact, this genetically modified corn was suspected to have contaminated over 300 products and these products had to

be recalled.

As a result, farmers and other companies which sold the accidentally tainted products lost enough money to sue for over 10 million dollars. These farmers and other companies didn’t just lose money, though, due to GMO corn which should have never entered the marketplace, they lost their good reputation, as well.

So, again, I ask, what are GMOs, really? I believe it is a question you should care about and be asking. Ask yourself, ask the biotech companies and ask the government. Keep asking, until you get an answer you can believe in.

I believe, it is time we begin to care about GMOs and the motives behind those who support the promotion of GMOs (such as Monsanto, the company who promoted Agent Orange and Aventis who brought you the Starlink Corn fiasco) and the motives behind those who support initiatives like a GE Free Zone in Lake County (such as Organic Farmers and The Coalition For Responsible Agriculture). Let’s not make the mistake of allowing the GMO monster to hide in the shadows and attack indiscriminately without accountability.

For a firsthand look at the newly drafted ordinance concerning the creation of a GE Free Zone in Lake County, please visit www.lakelive.info/cra/draftordinance.pdf and, if you like what you see give, go ahead and show your support by endorsing the ordinance and writing or calling your supervisor to express your support for a GE Free Zone in Lake County.

A supervisorial district map with phone numbers and email addresses for all board members is available at http://www.lakelive.info/bos.htm and don’t forget to join supporters of the GE Free Zone Ordinance at the BOS meeting on Tuesday, Oct. 21!

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