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Forum tries to spread word on modified foods

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LINCOLN - Janet Oenbring entered a discussion on genetically modified crops Saturday concerned about possible health dangers from eating food that contains things such as insect-resistant corn and herbicide-tolerant soybeans.

She left feeling a little more at ease.

"Maybe it is being regulated in ways we never realized," Oenbring said.

Oenbring was among 56 people from Lancaster County randomly selected by the University of Nebraska Public Policy Center and Leadership Lincoln to participate with a panel of experts in a forum on genetically modified foods.

They took surveys on their knowledge of the subject both before and after receiving background materials and holding the discussion. Results will be released on the center's Web site and to policy-makers by late September, said John Fulwider, a graduate research assistant at the Public Policy Center.

Citizen dialogues help provide lawmakers and others with a better idea of how people feel after they have been informed on the issues, Fulwider said.

At the public library in Lincoln, for example, Oenbring and others were told that genetically modified crops are tested for at least three years before being placed in food products. In the decade they have been used there have been no cases of their causing ill health, experts in agronomy and food science said.

Labeling foods for genetic modification would be expensive and unnecessary because the products are safe, said P. Stephen Baenziger of the University of Nebraska-Lincoln's Department of Agronomy and Horticulture.

Four other UNL professors and directors in plant pathology, horticulture and biotechnology also answered questions at the gathering.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture, the Food and Drug Administration and the Environmental Protection Agency all play a role in deciding what genetically modified foods hit the market.

Genetically modified crops are becoming more and more common, the panelists said. Last year, 85 percent of soybeans, 45 percent of corn and 76 percent of cotton planted in the United States were genetically modified varieties. In Nebraska, 92 percent of soybeans and 60 percent of corn were genetically modified.

The genetically modified crops end up in sweeteners and oils used in soda pop, potato chips and many other products. About two-thirds of food products on grocery store shelves contain some genetically modified ingredients.

Labels that would identify food products as genetically modified are not required in the United States. Several other countries require labeling based on what percentage of ingredients are genetically modified.

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