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Fears of genetically modified crops are unfounded, panel says

By MARGARET REIST / Lincoln Journal Star

Eating products made with genetically modified crops is not a risky venture, despite fears such scientific tinkering generates, a panel of experts said Saturday.

"There is no example of anyone in the world being hurt or (becoming) sick, no documented case," said Michael Fromm, director for the University of Nebraska-Lincoln Center for Biotechnology. "It's one thing to worry about it, but it helps to put it against that fact . . . The record is actually perfect."

The panel of five University of Nebraska researchers and professors answered questions about genetically modified foods — such as corn and soybeans — as part of a community discussion on the subject.

The citizen forum, sponsored by Leadership Lincoln and the University of Nebraska Public Policy Center, consisted of 50 randomly selected Lincoln and Lancaster County residents asked to read up on the subject then come together to discuss it.

Following small group discussions on the issue, the panel answered questions from each group at Gere Library.

Lyle Hunt, a retired Xerox technician, said he had given little thought to genetically modified food until asked to be a part of the forum.

Now, he said, he knows more, wants to learn even more, and had many of his concerns addressed by the panel — and a farmer named Jerry Minchow who was a part of his group.

"I learned a lot from Jerry because he's a farmer," Hunt said. "Lots of foods we eat are genetically modified."

That's true, according to the public policy center, which says 60 percent of the total acres of corn and 92 percent of soybeans planted last year in Nebraska were genetically modified. In 2003, genetically modified crops accounted for 25 percent of the cultivated acreage worldwide.

Minchow said he already knew raising such crops was safe or he wouldn't be doing it. A major benefit, he said, is that raising crops genetically modified to be resistant to insects means he doesn't have to use pesticides that contaminate water or pose dangers to people, he said.

"This helps me and helps the environment," he said.

Genetically modified plants have gone through much more rigorous testing than non-modified foods, said Professor Anne Vidaver, who heads the UNL Department of Plant Pathology.

Because a person's body breaks down foods, any problems would happen quickly, not long-term, Fromm said.

The biggest danger is taking a gene from a highly allergenic food such as peanuts and putting it into another food, a practice that is highly regulated, said Richard Goodman, research professor with UNL's Food Allergy Research Resource Program.

Labeling genetically modified food would be a costly proposition to both manufacturers and consumers, the panelists said.

Organic produce — which costs about twice as much as regular produce — is an example of the marketing implications, Fromm said.

Such labeling would force companies to use only genetically modified or non-modified food in their products because of the costs of ensuring there is no contamination during processing, he said.

The question is whether labeling something that's inherently safe —and paying twice as much for it — is wise, said Stephen Baenziger, UNL agronomy and horticulture professor.

"Is it worth it to label something that's inherently safe?"

Why, then, asked one of the groups, has Europe banned genetically modified foods?

The answer lies in cultural differences, a lack of trust by Europeans of their regulatory agencies — spurred on by such phenomena as mad cow disease — and an effort to protect European agriculture markets, panelists said.

Media coverage of the issue has also contributed, Fromm said.

"If you hear every day on the news that purple shoes are dangerous eventually you start worrying about purple shoes," he said.

Despite the focus on the risks, genetically modified foods offer many benefits, such as reducing the need for pesticides and adding needed vitamins or minerals, Baenziger said.

"They don't talk about the benefits," he said.

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