



## RESPONSIBLE INVESTMENTS

*Making a difference in the global community*

### Genetic Engineering and Food: An Update

Genetic engineering of food continues to be a hotly debated issue globally as well as locally. In the United States the majority of cotton and soybeans are genetically engineered and corn is approaching the 50 percent mark. Mexico, Brazil and other nations have recently approved the growing of genetically engineered (GE) crops. The European Union has approved one type of GE-corn for sale, and is deliberating further approvals. Some leaders in the food industry, such as the CEO of Kraft, continue to assert that GE-crops, also called transgenics, will be important to nutrition and protection of



the environment. AquaBounty is confident that its genetically engineered salmon will receive approval for release in the next year, and Ventria Biosciences is seeking approval to plant biopharma rice in Missouri.



Numerous genetically transformed crops are being field tested, yet after nine years of commercialization there are no products with a consumer benefit. None provide improved nutrition, better taste, or even a longer shelf life. Consumers are not clamoring for more GE-foods. Knowing this, the food industry in the U.S. is wary of labeling that identifies GE-ingredients, fearing that consumers will intentionally avoid them. Companies continually claim they are driven by consumer preference, but advocacy for consumer right-to-know has not persuaded food companies that labeling is the right move.

No official body has the responsibility for post-market monitoring of the health and environmental effects of GE-foods/crops. In January, experts convened at the UN Food and Agriculture Organization and recommended that any responsible deployment of genetically modified crops needs to comprise the whole technology development process, from pre-release risk assessment, to biosafety considerations

and post-release monitoring. In November 2004, the 1,000-plus member World Conservation Union demanded a moratorium on further release of genetically engineered organisms until it can be demonstrated that they pose no threat to biodiversity or

human and animal health. In the U.S., post-marketing surveillance has not been used to evaluate any of the GE-crops currently on the market (National Academy of Sciences, July 2004).

Regarding biopharming, the food industry has stated clearly through its trade associations (Grocery

Manufacturers Association and National Food Processors Association) that it opposes the use of food crops for plant-made pharmaceuticals (PMPs) or industrial chemicals. If pharma crops get into the food stream, the liability for food companies could be tremendous. This endeavor also presents a security risk. EPA toxicologist Suzanne Wuerthele warns that, "Just a few bushels of 'pharmcorn' producing swine vaccine could, if strategically planted by terrorists, contaminate virtually the entire U.S. corn supply and close international markets to us for years." Even though it is known from shareholder dialogue meetings that some food industry companies clearly oppose food-based PMPs, individual companies resist publicly reinforcing that position. As one analyst said, "Nobody wants to be first, they all want to be second." This is clearly a business matter.

Numerous reports have highlighted the inadequacies of the current regulatory system. Thus the Adrian Dominican Sisters and other members of the Interfaith Center on Corporate Responsibility continue to advocate for due diligence on the part of the food industry, for transparency about that due diligence, and for consumer right-to-know.

– Margaret Weber

*Coordinator of Corporate Responsibility*

*"We live right relationships with Earth Community."*

– General Chapter '04