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Regulations stunt the growth of agricultural biotech

By HENRY I. MILLER

Secretary of Agriculture Dan Glickman gave what he intended to be a strongly pro-biotechnology speech July 13, predicting that biotechnological solutions would help to "create a world where no one needs to go hungry, where developing nations can become more food self-sufficient."

But he neglected to mention a virulent pest that plagues agricultural biotechnology and makes those hopeful prospects unlikely: the U.S. Department of Agriculture's own regulatory policies.

The USDA singles out gene-spliced organisms for discriminatory regulation and has made experiments hugely expensive to perform. For example, gene-spliced plants being shipped or cultivated cannot be mixed with plants modified in other ways (which includes virtually all cultivated crop and garden plants), and all living plants must be destroyed at the completion of the field trial. (These requirements make as little sense as not permitting the mixing of oranges and tangerines in the same shopping bag.) A field trial with a gene-spliced plant costs 10 to 20 times more than the same experiment with a plant that has identical properties but which was modified with older, less-precise genetic techniques.

The result of federal over-regulation is that academic research in the United States has stagnated, entrepreneurial agricultural biotech companies have failed in droves, consumer prices have risen and work on low-value-added food products vital to developing countries has virtually disappeared.

National and international scientific organizations repeatedly have addressed the question of whether there are unique risks associated with gene-spliced organisms, with congruent conclusions: Gene-spliced plants are not inherently risky, and the greater precision in their construction actually makes them more predictable than new plant varieties crafted in other ways.

But Glickman boasted that the existing USDA approach to regulation is "tried and true" and announced various new, busy-work projects directed at biotech. These include the creation of a new advisory committee and "regional centers around the country to evaluate biotech products over a long period of time and to provide information" to those who want it. Would he also have wished to monitor the long-term environmental effects of the tangelo, when this genetic hybrid of tangerine and grapefruit was introduced, or the mutant peach we call a nectarine, or seedless grapes?

Challenges to the world's agriculture are proliferating at an alarming rate. There is an immediate and critical need for food crops with pest and disease resistance, greater drought and salinity tolerance and enhanced nutrient content. American farmers need new tools to enhance their productivity. There is also a strategic need for small, entrepreneurial biotechnology companies that can translate advances made in academic and governmental laboratories into tangible products and technologies for farmers and consumers.

As Glickman observed, agricultural biotechnology can provide all of this and more. But it is imperiled by the USDA's wrong-headed regulation, which inhibits research and development, discourages academic researchers, marginalizes small businesses and prevents Third World applications from being cost-effective.

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