

# Chicago Tribune

FOUNDED JUNE 10, 1847

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Friday, August 25, 2000

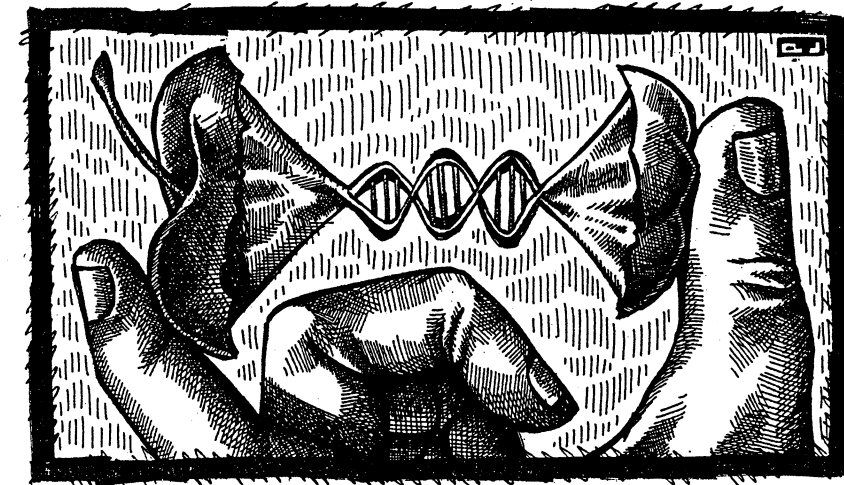


Illustration by Paul Lachine

## Resistance dropping toward biotech foods

By Jack Kemp

In spite of an ill-considered, anti-progress publicity campaign from left wing self-appointed consumer and environmental groups, the New Green Revolution based on genetic engineering is alive and well. Mark Twain himself might have gotten a chuckle from a new U.S. Department of Agriculture report that shows farmers are sticking with biotechnology despite claims that they would bail out under pressure from a well-organized media campaign. It was Twain, you recall, who contacted the media in 1897 to advise that, "The reports of my death are greatly exaggerated."

Just a few months ago anti-technology activists were crowing with delight, thinking they had created enough hysteria to drive farmers away from technologies that scientists believe have the utmost potential for meeting global food demand, which could triple in just the next 40 to 50 years.

The air got let out of these activists' balloon June 30, when the USDA announced that the amount of acreage planted with genetically engineered crops was holding steady—69 million acres this year compared with 71 million acres last year. Farmers continue to use biotech seeds despite pressure from activists and a severe slowdown in the farm economy. According to the USDA's survey, 54 percent of soybeans, 61 percent of cotton and 25 percent of corn grown in the U.S. is being produced from biotech seeds.

Farmers were fully aware that activist pressure was shutting some doors for biotech crops, including Frito-Lay, McDonald's, Whole Foods and others who

unfortunately decided to cave rather than fight. But they also realized that the demand for so-called conventional crops was only a small percentage of the overall U.S. production. The Archer-Daniels-Midland Co., for example, says that less than 5 percent of ADM's sales were to customers who preferred non-biotech grain. Farmers also learned that while a few companies were willing to pay a premium for non-biotech crops, the premium they actually were willing to pay hardly made up for losing the efficiency gains from biotechnology.

The National Center for Food and Agricultural Policy estimates that farmers save an estimated \$220 million annually in weed control costs by switching to soybeans that withstand glyphosate (Roundup herbicide). And cotton growers reduced their use of chemical insecticides by 2 million pounds during the first year that insect-resistant cotton was on the market. The reduction should be even greater as growers increased the biotech cotton acreage from 55 percent in 1999 to 61 percent this year. Equally important, there are major ecological benefits in cutting the use of pesticides and herbicides this way.

Corn acreage planted with bioengineered seeds did drop significantly in 2000, about 20 million acres versus 25 million last year, but that's because farmers were told the European corn borer population, the main pest targeted by biotech corn, would be light this year.

Meanwhile, the scientific consensus continues to build in favor of biotechnology. The National Academy of Sciences, joined by six other academies from around the world (Royal Society of London, Third World Academy of Sciences and national academies of Brazil, China, India and Mexico) recently issued a report declaring that biotechnology "should be used to increase the production of main food staples, in-

prove the efficiency of production, reduce the environmental impact of agriculture and provide access to food for small-scale farmers." The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations and the World Health Organization also issued a joint report approving the method we use to assess the safety of biotech crops.

Perhaps most important of all, eminent scientists are joining in huge numbers to endorse a "Petition in Support of Biotechnology." In July, chemist Paul Boyer was the third Nobel Prize winner to sign the petition, along with Nobel laureates Norman Borlaug and James Watson and more than 2,700 other highly regarded agriculture and health experts.

Even in Europe, where this new technology has encountered the most aggressive opposition, there is some encouraging news. The European Commission has agreed to pursue ways to restore public trust in their approval procedures for biotech foods, although the European Union unfortunately continues to pursue new regulatory options, such as labeling requirements that mislead more than they inform the public.

While a few well-publicized voices continue to stir up unfounded fears, science, technological innovation, and economic freedom will in the end win the war for a Second Green Revolution that will save lives, meet the demands of a growing and more affluent world population and combat disease and environmental disruption as well. That's too powerful a combination for ignorance to overcome.

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