PR WATCH

Public Interest Reporting on the PR/Public Affairs Industry

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ALSO IN THIS ISSUE:

Force Feeding Genetically Engineered Foods

by Karen Charman

The biotech industry has chosen a slam dunk strategy to gain public acceptance for its products: Slip unlabeled genetically engineered food into the food supply and hope too many people don't notice or object. Deal with those who do notice and object with an army of "experts" that stand ready to refute any criticisms or critics of the technology. If a lot of people start to object, by that time it should be too late because much of the food supply will already be genetically engineered. If plans run awry for some reason, mount a full public relations offensive and pass the ball to the World Trade Organization whose rules favor free trade. A victory there isn't such a long shot, and if it works, slam dunk!

Up until fairly recently, the strategy was going pretty much according to plan. The first large-scale commercial plantings of transgenic crops went into the ground in 1996, and by 1998 they covered nearly 69 million acres in eight countries, not including China. Last year, 74 percent of the world's transgenic crops were grown in the United States. This year more than half of the US corn crop and between one-third

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Flack Attack

The current campaign by agribusiness to win public approval for genetically modified foods gives new meaning to the phrase, "the carrot and the stick."

The carrot in this campaign consists of promises that biotechnology means better food, a cleaner environment, and prosperity for struggling farmers. The stick consists of lawsuits and threats of lawsuits against biotech's critics—now made easier with the "agricultural product disparagement laws" that industry has lobbied into law in more than a dozen states. Threats of lawsuits have been used repeatedly against writers who have exposed the activities of the personnel engaged in flacking for biotech foods. In "The Professor Who Can Read Your Mind," Karen Charman describes one such threat that she encountered in the course of researching her stories for this issue.

The food industry wants to "educate" you about "ethical and scientific issues" associated with genetically modified foods, but its notion of education is based on a propaganda model in which you, as student, are meant to sit still and listen while it, the teacher, tells you what to think. That is why secrecy and control of information is a major part of its educational campaign.

Secrecy is what motivates Professor Tom Hoban's legal threat and his refusal to disclose the identity of his clients, just as it motivates the Burson-Marsteller PR firm's refusal even to confirm that it has been hired by the Monsanto company to flack for biotech foods.

The biotech food industry likes to pretend that education is necessary because the public is ignorant, irrational and easily moved by "Luddite technophobia," "hysteria" and "environmental scare tactics." And it is true that the public *is* ignorant—especially about the scale and scope of the changes which industry has already begun to introduce without public consultation or consent. But ignorance is not irrationality, and it is precisely the fear of an informed public that now has industry and its minions running scared.

to half of the soybeans planted were genetically engineered varieties. Gene-altered products on the market include canola, potatoes, tomatoes, sweet peppers, peanuts, sunflower, milk and chymosin, an enzyme commonly used in hard cheese. Since corn and soy, in particular, are so widely disseminated in processed foods as sweeteners, oils, texturizers, extenders, etc., consumers have been eating increasing amounts of genetically engineered food for the last four years—mostly without their knowledge or consent—because the food has not been labeled as such.

EUROPE GAGS

European activists in groups like Greenpeace and Friends of the Earth objected to genetically engineered foods sneaking into the food supply and brought the issue to the attention of the European media and public. With the mad cow debacle and other public health and food safety crises fresh in their minds, European consumers have told American biotech companies to take their transgenic food and shove it—at least until they feel that they have received adequate answers to their questions about the safety of consuming genetically engineered food and releasing genetically modified organisms (GMOs) into the environment.

European supermarkets and food companies, like Nestlé, Cadbury and Unilever, are scrambling to assure their customers that their products are GMO-free. They are looking for non-GMO sources, mainly outside the US, which has caused major food ingredient suppliers such as Archer Daniels Midland to begin separating their GMO and non-GMO product. To ensure it has some GMO-free product, ADM—"supermarket to the world"—is even contracting farmers to grow non-GMO crops near its processing plants in Decatur, Illinois.

In addition to Europe, the issue is getting extensive play in Australia and New Zealand, and Japanese consumers are in an uproar as well. The European Union, Japan, South Korea, New Zealand and Australia have all passed some sort of mandatory labeling law for GMOs. "The firestorm in Europe landed in different parts of the world, and all of a sudden we have global distrust of the technology," one biotech industry analyst said.

Eyeing the wreckage in other countries, the biotech industry is terrified of a consumer backlash here. More and more stories questioning various aspects of the technology and reporting on the international consumer revolt are appearing in influential publications such as the *New York Times*, the *Los Angeles Times*, the *Wall Street Journal*, *Time*, *Newsweek* and *Consumer Reports*.

In July, the PR trade publication *PR Week* ran a story titled "Field of Bad Dreams," which reported that industry got "a wake-up call" following the release of a laboratory study showing that Monarch butterflies were killed by eating pollen from corn genetically modified to produce its own insecticide. Discoveries like that could end consumer complacency "in an instant," one source in the story commented.

To prevent a US consumer backlash, *PR Week* advised ag PR pros to lay the foundation for public acceptance of biotech foods. This would entail setting up "early warning systems" to handle awkward studies and activist groups questioning their products; training seed company officials to deal with the popular press; getting seed companies to publicize their research; and roping in "third party spokespersons" to trumpet pro-biotech statements and opinions from government regulators. Farmers make especially good spokespersons, *PR Week* advised, because they "garner positive response from American consumers." It warned that food companies "need to be very precise about what the meaning of safe is in regard to these products," reminding its readers that "agri-chemical makers have been doing that for years, telling farmers their fertilizer and pesticide products are safe *only if used as directed"* (emphasis added).

PR firms with food industry clients have quietly begun laying the groundwork. Fleishman Hillard, rated number two in ag PR, predicted that about $2.5 million of the $10 million it earns for agricultural PR in the coming year will be for "crisis preparedness" related to genetic engineering issues. Before a crisis hits, PR professionals want to emphasize "the value message,"—i.e. that genetically engineered crops offer the only way to feed a growing world population, especially at a time when land for agriculture is shrinking.

In early October, to coincide with a two-day Senate Agriculture Committee hearing on ag biotech, the food industry launched the Alliance for Better Foods, its first public pre-emptive strike against an anti-GMO consumer backlash. The alliance has its own website (www.betterfoods.org), which lists the Grocery Manufacturers of America (GMA), the American Farm Bureau Federation, and 24 other trade associations representing virtually every segment of the food industry (except the organic foods sector). The alliance is run by the Washington office of BSMG Worldwide, a full service PR firm whose clients include Monsanto, the Chemical Manufacturers Association, Procter & Gamble, Philip Morris, and numerous other large food, chemical and pharmaceutical corporations.

The GMA is the driving force behind the Alliance for Better Foods said GMA spokesperson Brian Sansoni. The alliance doesn't include biotech companies or their

trade association, the Biotechnology Industry Association (BIO), he said, but was created to get the food industry "to speak from the same page" in support of the technology. "We didn't want the activists' misinformation and scare campaign to be the story—like what happened in Europe," he said.

Sansoni wouldn't say much else about what the alliance is up to, but The *Philadelphia Inquirer* recently reported that "it and BIO say the heart of their strategies will be behind-the-scenes efforts to educate journalists." The paper notes that BIO is inviting journalists to a symposium in Chicago in November and quotes pro-biotech pollster Tom Hoban's observation that these "educational" efforts are important because media stories will be crucial to shaping public opinion.

THE SOUNDS OF SOUND SCIENCE

The anxiety level of the industry and its backers appears to be increasing substantially. At the above-mentioned Senate Ag Committee hearing, many called on EPA, FDA, and USDA, the three federal agencies with regulatory jurisdiction over biotech, to step up their efforts to defend the technology. According to the trade publication *Food Chemical News,* Senate agriculture committee chairman Richard Lugar told the agencies they are obligated to correct false statements made in the media and publish "sound science" that backs the safety of their approvals for biotech foods. "Industry wants a stronger seal of approval. . . . There's a difference between saying it's not unsafe and saying it's safe," the publication quotes him as saying.

This sentiment was repeated by Marc Curtis, president of the American Soybean Association, who complained that the Clinton Administration has not clearly signaled how it intends to handle biotech issues in the coming round of world trade talks that begin in Seattle at the end of November. Obviously rattled by what many in the industry have termed "terrorist attacks," Curtis also called on Congress to make vandalism against biotech field trials a harshly punished federal crime.

Biotech scientists from a variety of land grant universities stressed many versions of "the value message" in their testimony: on the promise of biotechnology to cure people of chronic diseases, prevent food allergies, lower the risk of heart attacks and even some cancers, deliver vaccines, prevent the inevitable plowing under of wilderness areas, replace polluting industrial petrochemicals, reduce chemical use in agriculture, and enrich economically depressed rural communities. Some lamented that all these dreams could vanish if biotechnology's critics prevail.

Roger Beachy, president of the newly established Donald Danforth Plant Center, a non-profit biotech research organization set up in St. Louis with funding from Monsanto, the Danforth Foundation and the state of Missouri, further chided biotech critics by suggesting that their alternative to biotech food, organic food, was not guaranteed to be safe. Repeating a falsehood that began with Dennis Avery from the right-wing Hudson Institute, he said organic food "makes good use of animal manure to fertilize crops" which may or may not be prop-

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erly composted and therefore carries a high risk of E. coli contamination. (See accompanying story on Dennis Avery on page 10 of this issue.) Beachy, like Senator Lugar, demanded more support from government agencies: "Where's FDA, NIH, [Agriculture] Secretary Glickman?" on this, he asked.

MORE THAN THEY BARGAINED FOR

Many farmers—who responded in droves to industry's intense pro-biotech PR and sales pitches—don't appear to be waiting for the USDA, FDA, NIH or EPA to do something about the growing consumer revolt against genetically engineered food. The American Corn Growers Association, a progressive commodity group that represents thousands of corn growers in 28 states, is encouraging its members to plant non-GMO varieties. Even the pro-biotech National Corn Growers Association (NCGA), the "official" corn commodity group that represents larger growers, can't argue with a 96% drop in the European market in one year. Between the 1996/97 and 1997/98 seasons, European corn purchases fell from nearly 70 million bushels to less than 3 million. At the Senate Ag Committee hearings, NCGA board member Tim Hume called on biotech seed companies to make sure they offered their best hybrid varieties in conventional versions.

As the biotech food controversy grows, the food industry appears to be waking up to the consequences of ramming through market approvals on questionable products without full and honest public debate. The trade publication *Supermarket News* put it this way in its October 25 issue: "Consumers' faith in the government and retailers as watchdogs over food safety could be broken, undermining one of the pillars upon which the modern supermarket was built." A representative from Nestlé, the world's largest food company, is reported to have put it this way at an industry conference discussing the consumer problem earlier this year: "Don't expect *us* to take a bullet for *your* GMO products," Nestlé told Monsanto and other biotech seed producers.

The food industry, however, does not appear to be interested in a full and honest public debate over genetically engineered food. Instead, it seems to be closing ranks. PR industry shenanigans and the Alliance for Better Foods' efforts to "educate" journalists and policy makers are just the latest tricks in a covert campaign that has been underway for years to spoon-feed biotech food to the public.

The International Food Information Council (IFIC), an industry-funded group, was created in 1985 to "communicate science-based information on food safety and nutrition" to virtually any group it believes wields influence over consumers—including professionals, educators, government officials, and journalists. IFIC has been working on food biotech issues since 1992 and has a lot of pro-biotech and food industry propaganda on its website (www.ificinfo.org), including such gung-ho gems as the following:

- "New Survey Finds Americans as Positive as Ever on Food Biotechnology"
- "Food Biotechnology—Benefits for Developing Countries"
- "New Research Shows Consumers Willing to Try Irradiated (Cold Pasteurized) Foods; Taste Very Important"
- "Consumers, Health Experts Desire Benefits of Biotech Foods and Concur with Current FDA Labeling Policy" [Current FDA policy does not require labeling of genetically modified foods.]

IFIC also posts a wealth of information on how journalists and others should understand and translate the plethora of food- and health-related studies and reports that emanate from various sources. It has links to the BIO site, which posts similar material, and both sites list a variety of pro-biotech expert opinions.

The biotech industry has lined up an impressive roster of groups and individuals supporting its cause. The American Medical Association; the American Dietetic Association; the United Nation's Food and Agriculture Organization, the World Health Organization, the World Bank, James Watson, the co-discoverer of DNA; and a wide range of government officials—even former president Jimmy Carter—are all on record either plugging the technology or downplaying consumer concerns.

Right-wing policy factories are also stepping up their pro-biotech campaign. Earlier this year, the Competitive Enterprise Institute, which has received money from the oil industry, Philip Morris, and from pharmaceutical and chemical companies, hired Michael Gough, PhD as its "biotechnology advocate" to "help advance the great promise of biotechnology in food production, medicine development and environmental protection." For Gough to even use the phrase "environmental protection" is an interesting exercise in hypocrisy, since he has spent much of his career denying that environmental problems even exist. Gough co-authored *Silencing Science* with internet "junkman" Steven Milloy (see story on page 10 of this issue), and he frequently trashes health and environmental advocates on the op-ed pages of publications like the *Washington Post*, the *Detroit News*, the *Wall Street Journal*, the *Journal of Commerce*, and the *Chicago Tribune*.

Monsanto and Burson-Marsteller Hire a Consumer Organizer

Executives at the Burson-Marsteller PR firm are saying as little as possible about their pro-biotech PR campaign for the Monsanto company. Jerry Morrison, a longtime consumer and labor organizer who now runs a firm called the Strategic Consulting Group, says he didn't even know Monsanto was the end client when B-M hired him in early November to pitch local groups about the merits of genetically modified foods.

Morrison has especially close ties with Citizen Action of Illinois, the state's leading consumer organization. In 1998, he ran the successful U.S. congressional campaign of Jan Schakowsky, a member of the Citizen Action board of directors who is well-known as a Chicago consumer advocate. Morrison's business partner, Bob Creamer, is Schakowsky's husband and was Citizen Action's executive director prior to resigning last year under a cloud related to his handling of the organization's finances.

Morrison was hired in conjunction with public hearings that the Food and Drug Administration has scheduled as part of its "Biotechnology in the Year 2000 and Beyond" program. In Chicago, a hearing was held on Nov. 18, with some environmentalists complaining that they received very little advance time to register. The FDA initially booked a room with seating of only 100, and some people say when they called they were told the roster was already full. After the number of people wanting to speak surpassed 500, FDA moved the hearing to a larger venue.

When questioned by *PR Watch*, Morrison readily admitted that B-M has hired him to meet with farmers, unions, consumer and "faith-based" groups to counter what he describes as "environmentalist public hysteria" about biotech foods.

"I've been a union organizer, a community organizer," Morrison said. "I'm not going to have my credentials questioned by these folks. On most issues I work with environmental groups. I disagree with them on this issue. Burson-Marsteller has approached me to work with them on a number of other issues in the past and I declined because I disagreed with them, but I agree with them on this issue."

In fact, Morrison's liberal credentials appear to be precisely the reason he was hired. *PR Watch* interviewed several activists who disagree with Morrison's position but declined to be quoted on the record. "I'm a friend of Jerry's," explained one, who said he is "pissed off" at his decision to work for Burson-Marsteller. Morrison's connections, he said, make it easier to stifle organized consumer opposition to biotech foods. "It may not mean that Citizen Action goes out and says they're fine," he said. "It may just mean that they're silent, and that can be worse."

Both Morrison and Burson-Marsteller have been cagey about the details of their work. Morrison told *O'Dwyer's PR Services* that he coordinates his work with B-M's Chicago office, but refused to give the name of the person he reports to. John LaSage, B-M's Midwest Region Chairman, said he wasn't aware that Morrison had been hired. Peter Himler, B-M's executive vice president for media relations, even refused on Nov. 11 to confirm that Monsanto was a client. However, the *New York Times* reported on Nov. 12 that Monsanto "recently retained Burston-Marsteller . . . at an annual cost of millions of dollars."

Direct Impact, a subsidiary of B-M specializing in "grassroots PR," has also been involved in trying to get pro-industry testimony at the FDA hearings.

The "corporate science" defenders of food biotechnology also include Henry Miller from Stanford University's Hoover Institute and Michael Fumento (also affiliated with CEI and with Consumer Alert, a right-wing "alternative" to Consumers Union), and other pillars of the anti-environment establishment.

Both critics and defenders of the technology are coming to understand that the brewing public debate over transgenic food may have much bigger stakes than they originally anticipated. Genetically engineered food was introduced by stealth, but overseas the secret is well and truly out, and public awareness is starting to emerge now in the United States as well. The same vested interests that didn't trust the public enough to inform us up front that they were introducing genetically engineered food into the environment and our grocery stores are now asking us to trust them as reliable experts on the questions of whether this innovation is safe and good. Their fear—and our hope—is that the debate on biotech foods could be the issue that awakens the public to the realization that government food and environment regulators are not presently functioning to safeguard the public's best interests.

The Hudson Institute's Dennis Avery told the *Philadelphia Inquirer* that he thinks industry should go straight to the public with a massive advertising campaign. Stay tuned. Unlike much of what appears on television these days, this promises to be interesting. ■

The Professor Who Can Read Your Mind

by Karen Charman

Tom Hoban is a man with a mission: to convince people to embrace genetically engineered food. I had the opportunity to experience this firsthand at the Biotechnology Industry Organization (BIO) annual conference in New York City in June 1998 while we were lining up for lunch. Seeing the press pass dangling around my neck, he made a beeline for me and proceeded to attempt to educate me about the wonders of food biotechnology.

That might not seem strange—plenty of people push biotech—but Hoban is not a public relations flack or salesman at a company peddling biotech food. He is a professor in the sociology department at North Carolina State University (NCSU). Hoban specializes in consumer behavior and the psychology of conflict, a position that gives him a veneer (but only a thin veneer) of objectivity.

Industry promoters widely regard Hoban as the preeminent expert in consumer attitudes on gene-altered food, and he is listed in several industry source guides for journalists. Over the last ten years, he has conducted a number of government- and industry-funded surveys, which he says consistently show "two-thirds to three-quarters of U.S. consumers are positive about food biotechnology." Considering the controversy swirling around biotech food overseas and the likelihood that it will erupt on these shores, such a finding must be comforting to industry. His data, however, is questionable.

Hoban says he helped design the questions in a much-touted consumer survey conducted for the International Food Information Council (IFIC) but carried out by the Republican political and polling firm, the Wirthlin Group. The survey was first done in March 1997 and then repeated in February 1999, ostensibly so that a trend could be established. Besides trumpeting strong support for genetically engineered food, the nine-question survey indicates that consumer awareness of biotech food is low. It also claims there is little support for labeling biotech foods.

The problem with the survey, however, is that the questions it asked are loaded with language designed to bias the answers. Examples include:

- "How likely would you be to buy a variety of produce, like tomatoes or potatoes, if it had been modified by biotechnology to taste better or fresher?"
- "How likely would you be to buy a variety of produce . . . if it had been modified by biotechnology to be protected from insect damage and required fewer pesticide applications?"
- "Biotechnology has also been used to enhance plants that yield foods like cooking oils. . . . Would this have a positive effect, a negative effect, or no effect on your purchase decision?"
- "Some critics . . . say that any food produced through biotechnology should be labeled even if the food has the same safety and nutritional content as other foods. However, others, including the FDA, believe such a labeling requirement has no scientific basis, and would be costly and confusing to consumers. Are you more likely to agree with the labeling position of the FDA or with its critics?"

James Beniger, a communications professor at the University of Southern California and past president of the American Association for Public Opinion Research, reviewed the IFIC survey and said it is so biased with leading questions favoring positive responses that any results are meaningless. UCLA communications professor Michael Suman agreed, adding that the questions "only talk about the food tasting better, being fresher, protecting food from insect damage, reducing saturated fat and providing benefits. It's like saying 'Here's biotechnology, it does these great things for you, do you like it?' " The results might be different, Suman offers, if it contained questions biased in the other direction such as: "Some people contend that some foods produced from biotechnology cause higher rates of cancer. If that is so, what effect would that have on your buying decision?"

IGNORANCE IS BLISS

Hoban's rap, either while presenting a paper at a biotech industry conference or in a one-on-one interview, is equally questionable. It goes something like this (my paraphrase): "The public is much more positive about food biotechnology than the activists would have you believe. Most people don't know much about biotechnology, but that's because it is not important to them. Americans—unlike Europeans who have been through traumatizing food scares—have great trust in the public agencies that regulate our food supply. Since the FDA says genetically modified food is safe, that is good enough for most. The FDA position on labeling is sensible because a label for biotech food would only confuse consumers and hike the cost. Activist types are suspicious of biotechnology, but they are probably technophobic and only represent a minority view. Biotechnology is no different than what crop breeders have been doing all along—it's just more sophisticated and more precise, so what's the big deal? People support biotechnology in food because it will benefit them. People's views on food are based on whether they think it will bring them a tangible benefit—fresher, better taste, convenience, higher nutrition, and price. Environmental and food safety con-

cerns only surface if there is irresponsible and sensational media attention that stirs up fear. Besides, biotechnology is good for farmers, and Americans—unlike Europeans—like to support their farmers."

At industry gatherings, Hoban emphasizes—and pokes fun at—the scientific illiteracy of the general public. At the BIO meeting, after telling his audience that consumers decide what food to buy based on taste, value, and convenience, *not* on how the seed was produced, he quipped: "Lots of American consumers probably don't know seeds are involved in agriculture—they don't even know *farms* are involved in agriculture."

"Everybody's going to be using biotech foods pretty soon, so there won't be a lot of alternatives."
—Professor-cum-Pollster Tom Hoban

In a recent telephone interview, he said that when he asks people about concerns critics have been raising about the technology, most respondents only express a vague sense that biotech may result in some unwanted and unanticipated consequences somewhere down the line. But again, ignorance shapes their response. "People tend to think the positive is going to outweigh the negative when we describe it for them. In general, they don't know enough about it to get into all the details—that a plant is going to somehow have its genes transferred to another plant," he said. "When you present that to people in a focus group, they will scratch their head and not really know what you are talking about."

COMFORT FOOD

Hoban sees such public ignorance as a great opportunity for industry to "proactively educate" consumers to gain trust in biotechnology. At the BIO meeting, he complimented biotech companies and industry groups like IFIC and BIO for "paving the way for biotechnology in the U.S." and making the public "comfortable" to the point that he predicted genetically engineered food "will not be an issue for the vast majority of consumers."

Hoban miscalculated the extent to which genetically engineered food has become an issue in Europe. At the June 1998 BIO meeting, he said activist groups like Greenpeace had gotten all the media attention but they didn't really represent the average European consumer. Today he concedes the biotech industry made some mistakes in being too aggressive about pushing the technology and not labeling the products so that European consumers could make their own choices. However, he blames most of Europe's reaction on an out-of-control media that "terrorized" European citizens with daily headlines of Frankenfood, combined with the aftershocks of betrayal over mad cow disease in England and dioxin contamination in Belgium.

European controversy or not, Hoban doesn't seem to be too worried about the future prospects of the industry. He says non-GMO products are becoming difficult to find, and "everybody's going to be using biotech foods pretty soon, so there won't be a lot of alternatives."

EXPERT FOR HIRE—ATTORNEY INCLUDED

A short biography of Hoban precedes an interview with him that appeared in the May 1996 issue of *PBI Bulletin*, a publication of the Canadian National Research Council. It describes him as an Associate Professor and Extension Sociology Specialist at NCSU whose "main responsibilities involve working with government agencies, industry and others to improve the assessment and transfer of new technologies." Much of his work "focuses on how people accept new products and respond to change," including "ethical and educational implications of biotechnology." Besides a PhD in rural sociology, Hoban has master's degrees in agricultural journalism and water resource management, plus a BS in biology.

Hoban advertises his social research consultant services on his own web page (sasw.chass.ncsu.edu/~tom/). The page says he has "unique and interdisciplinary perspectives" and "provides a practical focus for managing change." It also says, "Dr. Hoban provides timely advice and expert assistance in a number of areas including: consumer response to new products; public perceptions of food biotechnology; management of innovation and change; public opinion about technology and the environment; and issue and crisis management." Specific skills listed include: "survey and focus group research; team building and partnering; strategic planning; policy analysis; needs assessment; and technology forecasting."

Hoban was out of the country when I called to ask who his clients are, so I called NCSU to request the "External Professional Activities For Pay" forms that the university requires its faculty to file when they take on outside work. The university replied that the forms were "confidential personnel information" and refused to provide them. When I called Hoban later to request the information, he refused and was furious that I had contacted the university. He added that he had checked out *PR Watch*, found it to be very biased, and threatened that his attorney would look closely at anything we wrote. ■

"Biotechnology Will Feed the World" and Other Myths

by Karen Charman

Monsanto and other corporate proponents of genetic engineering are using a form of emotional blackmail to get people to accept this new technology. They claim biotechnology will be a savior and fix many of the very real and pressing problems that the Monsantos of the world created in the first place.

Monsanto's past record as a chemical manuufacturer does not inspire confidence in its environmental stewardship. Witness Times Beach, Missouri. The town was so contaminated with dioxin that in 1982 the federal government ordered it to be evacuated. Monsanto has continually denied any connection with the catastrophe, yet laboratory documents were found showing that large concentrations of PCBs in town soil samples were manufactured by Monsanto.

The thing about the past, as opposed to the future, is that facts about it are harder to fabricate. Rather than recall the past polluting activities of today's biotech industry leaders, government and agribusiness interests prefer to talk about the technology's promise for the future, casting biotechnology as the answer to some of humanity's deepest and oldest aspirations. The fundamental contradiction in this message is that while on the one hand they want to present biotechnology as something new, powerful, and revolutionary, at the same time they want to reassure us that that what they are doing is cautious, prudent, safe and in keeping with age-old agricultural traditions.

Biotech Myth #1: Biotechnology is nothing new. The use of genetic engineering to improve food crops is merely a natural extension of plant breeding techniques that have been used since time immemorial. Promoters of agricultural biotechnology insist that genetic engineering is just a faster and more precise way to improve crops than traditional plant breeding methods, which can take several generations of breeding and therefore be a lot more time-consuming.

Fact: While it is true that conventional breeding methods have yielded a wide variety of plants and animals that did not exist previously, the genes that produce those traits have come from within their own or closely-related species. Modern genetic engineering can take genes from a species such as a fish or a virus and place them into an entirely different species, such as a tomato. This gives humans—actually, corporations—radical new powers, with unpredictable consequences.

Biotech Myth #2: Biotech foods are the most extensively researched and regulated food products ever.

Fact: Every industry likes to pretend that its products are the most extensively researched and regulated products in existence. The nuclear power industry has made this claim, as have the makers of vinyl chloride, dioxin, fen-phen, MSG and Olestra.

Back in 1992, the FDA decreed that genetically engineered foods were no different than conventional foods. Under FDA law, unless a food is "generally regarded as safe" (GRAS), a legal determination, it must be thoroughly tested. Because biotech foods have been determined "GRAS," they undergo no independent safety testing. Instead, government regulators rely on biotech companies to do their own safety tests and also determine themselves if the product in question is GRAS.

Testing biotech crops for their environmental safety is equally lax. It is up to the USDA to ensure that genetically modified crops are ecologically safe. The *New York Times* recently reported that the agency has not rejected a single application for a biotech crop and that many scientists say "the department has relied on unsupported claims and shoddy studies by the seed companies."

Biotech Myth #3: Genetically engineered crops will allow us to reduce, if not eliminate, environmentally toxic pesticides and fertilizers. Biotechnology is therefore good for the environment.

Fact: So far, the opposite has been true. The vast majority of genetically engineered crops currently on the market have been modified to either withstand herbicide (so that more can be sprayed) or produce their own insecticide.

This year, more than half of the US soybean crop was genetically engineered to survive spraying with Monsanto's best-selling weedkiller, Roundup. An analysis of 8,200 university research trials revealed that farmers planting Roundup Ready soybeans are using two to five times as much of the herbicide as farmers growing conventional varieties. Chuck Benbrook, who reported the results of the studies, said nobody is testing the crops for increased residues of Roundup. The EPA, moreover, has raised the allowable residue limits for Roundup on forage crops.

Producing a plant that can make its own insecticide so that farmers don't have to spray insecticides may sound like a good idea, but anything more than the most superficial consideration reveals otherwise. Bacillus thuringiensis (Bt) is a natural soil bacterium that destroys the digestive tracts of certain very pesky insects, like the Colorado Potato Beetle and the European Corn Borer. It is one of the safest insecticides known and has been used in spray form by organic farmers for years. Biotech companies have engineered crops—corn, cotton, canola, and potatoes—with a Bt gene so that Bt crops express the toxin in every cell of the plant. Such widespread use

of the toxin will eventually make the bugs it targets resistant to it. That's just evolution, plain and simple. The loss of Bt, which is currently used sparingly by organic farmers, will deprive sustainable agriculture of one of its most effective tools.

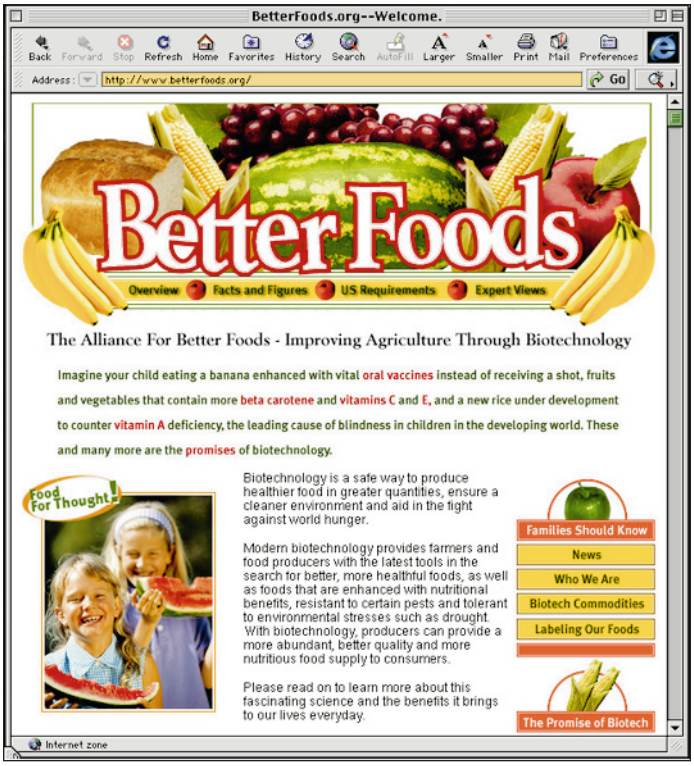
Another point that biotech promoters never mention is that unlike other forms of pollution, genetic pollution produces live organisms that can grow, reproduce, mutate, and migrate. For that reason, genetic pollution may cause greater long-term harm than the petrochemical toxins now plaguing the planet, as Jeremy Rifkin observes in his book, *The Biotech Century*.

Already there have been instances of genes escaping much farther than anyone predicted. Harvard geneticist Richard Lewontin was quoted in a *New York Times Magazine* article last year saying, "There's no way of knowing what the downstream effects will be or how [genetic engineering] might affect the environment. We have such a miserably poor understanding of how the organism develops from its DNA that I would be surprised if we *don't* get one rude shock after another" (emphasis his).

Biotech Myth #4: Biotechnology will increase crop yields, help farmers and rebuild rural economies.

Fact: So far, the opposite has been true. Aside from throwing corn and soybean growers into a tailspin because of the international consumer revolt against genetic engineering, 8,200 university research trials comparing the performance of different varieties of soybeans show that yields of genetically engineered herbicide resistant soybeans are lower than comparable conventional varieties. Since more than half of the soybeans planted this year were Roundup Ready varieties, the 5–10 percent yield drag is a significant drop—some 80 to 100 million bushels.

The contracts governing the use of transgenic seeds are not exactly farmer-friendly, either. Genetic engineering turns the seeds themselves into "intellectual property," so the farmers using the seeds don't legally own them. Monsanto likes to use the analogy of leasing a car—at the end of the lease, the car is returned. This new ownership arrangement makes it illegal to engage in the time-honored practice of saving seeds, a practice which is especially common in the Third World. In the United States and Canada, Monsanto pressed this concept to the point of hiring private investigators to swipe plants from farmers who didn't buy their seeds to see if they are planting Monsanto's transgenic varieties. Monsanto has also encouraged its farmers to snitch on neighbors they suspected of planting transgenics without



The website of the industry-backed "Alliance for Better Foods" portrays genetic engineering as the key to a future cornucopia of nutritional abundance.

paying for them. There's even a case in Canada of an elderly farmer who is being sued by Monsanto for intellectual property theft. He swears he never planted Monsanto's transgenic seed, yet it showed up in his field, quite possibly through genetic drift—i.e., contamination of his crops by wind-blown, genetically-engineered pollen. While this type of harassment continues, genetic engineering can be considered a "benefit" to rural communities only insofar as farmers enjoy living in a police state.

Biotech Myth #5: Biotechnology is the only hope we have to feed a growing world population.

Fact: Starvation and malnutrition are very real problems, but they are caused by unequal distribution of wealth, not by food scarcity. According to the United Nations World Food Program, there is currently more than enough food produced to feed everyone on the planet an adequate and healthy diet. The reason that approximately 800 million people go hungry each year is that they don't have access to food by either being able to afford it or grow their own. Biotechnology, by turning living crops into "intellectual property," increases corporate control over food resources and production. Rather than alleviate world hunger, biotechnology is likely to exacerbate it by increasing everybody's dependence on the corporate sector for seeds and the materials needed to grow them. ■

Saving the Planet With Pestilent Statistics

by Karen Charman

Dennis T. Avery, author of the tract "Saving the Planet with Pesticides and Plastic," proudly describes himself as a missionary. His mission: to protect and promote "high-yield farming to save wildlife."

Besides writing a nationally syndicated weekly column for the financial newswire Bridge News, Avery is also the director of the Hudson Institute's Center for Global Food Issues. He travels the country and the world preaching his gospel of biotechnology, pesticides, irradiation, factory farming and free trade. According to Avery, it is the greenies and "organic frenzies" who threaten the world with famine and loss of habitat for their sacred wildlife. Why? Because farming without synthetic pesticides, petrochemical fertilizers and biotechnology would require too much land.

Avery sees no problem with agricultural pollution, be it groundwater contamination, pesticide and fertilizer runoff, or even the mountains of stinking manure produced by the huge cattle, chicken and hog operations that plague increasing numbers of rural communities. He denies that there is any link between pesticides and cancer or other illnesses. In fact, he says, organic food is what will kill you.

Last Fall Avery began claiming that "people who eat organic and 'natural' foods are eight times as likely as the rest of the population to be attacked by a deadly new strain of *E. coli* bacteria (0157:H7)." This happens, he says, because organic food is grown in animal manure, a known carrier of this nasty microbe. He says his data comes from Dr. Paul Mead, an epidemiologist at the U.S. Centers for Disease Control (CDC), the federal agency that tracks outbreaks of foodborne illness.

Avery continues delivering this message with op-eds that bear titles such as "The Silent Killer in Organic Foods" and "Wallace Institute Got it Wrong: CDC Data Does Indicate Higher Risk From Organic and Natural Foods." These editorials are diseminated by Bridge News to between 300 and 400 newspapers throughout the country and approximately 500,000 other subscribers here and abroad including government departments, central banks and businesses.

I heard Avery's sermon live in June 1999 at the National Agricultural Biotechnology Council meeting in Lincoln, Nebraska. After his talk I asked him why he quoted the CDC as the source of his information when they deny having data attributing *E. coli* 0157:H7 outbreaks to organic food. He accused CDC of engaging in a "cover-up" due to pressure from environmentalists.

Back home I noticed more than a couple of similar stories popping up in various venues. One particularly sloppy story, titled "Organic Food Creates Higher Risk for Food Poisoning," was posted on August 25, 1999 on USDA's National Food Safety Database by US Newswire, a service that electronically disseminates news releases. Though this story doesn't quote Avery, it quotes the CDC's Foodborne and Diarrheal Diseases Branch chief, Dr. Robert Tauxe, saying, "Organic food means a food was grown in animal manure."

Tauxe denies ever making that statement and says he believes the rumor originated with Dennis Avery. After fielding numerous media queries on the subject, CDC took the unusual step on January 14, 1999 of issuing a press release stating, "The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has not conducted any study that compares or quantitates the specific risk for infection with *E. coli* 0157:H7 and eating either conventionally grown or organic/natural foods." In addition, Tauxe says he called Avery to tell him to stop claiming that the CDC was the source of this allegation. Avery responded by telling Tauxe, "That's your interpretation, and I have mine."

Avery's newest version of what happened with the CDC is that Dr. Paul Mead, an epidemiologist who works in Tauxe's division, gave him the information. Absolute bunk, says Mead. "What happened is that he called me up and announced that eight percent of the outbreaks of foodborne illness were from organic food. I took some exception to that and said I didn't know him and what his purpose was, but our data don't support that." Mead was chagrined to hear that a year after this conversation took place, Avery is still sourcing this phantom data back to him.

Contrary to Avery's claim, *E. coli* 0157:H7 contamination from manure is *less* likely to occur on organic farms than in the factory farming system that Avery supports. Fred Kirschenmann is an organic farmer and board chairman of the private organic certification company Farm Verified Organic. He points out that a single cow produces approximately 10 times as much fecal matter as a human being. This means that a feedlot of, say, 5,000 head of cattle would produce the same amount of manure as 50,000 people. Yet modern conventional agriculture does not regulate the use of raw manure in food crops, Kirschenmann says, and farmers are spreading increasing amounts of it on their fields because it is too expensive to truck away and they don't have anywhere else to put it.

Kirschenmann serves on the National Organic Standards Board which was charged by Congress to advise the USDA in formulating its legal standards defining organic food. "In organic systems, most animals have to have access to pasture, so they can't be concentrated in huge feedlots," he says, adding that Avery's charge that

organic food is grown in manure is misleading, at best. "Organic farmers use manure, but virtually every certification organization I know of doesn't allow raw manure. Raw manure must either be composted or applied long enough in advance that the bacteria is no longer active," he said, adding that this requirement is being written into USDA's proposed rules.

Dr. Robert Elder, a research microbiologist at the USDA's Meat Animal Research Center in Clay Center, Nebraska, specializes in measuring *E. coli* 0157:H7 in cattle. He says this deadly bacteria could be prevented from contaminating meat carcasses before they are ground into hamburger. "If you took meticulous time with every single carcass to vigorously clean it, scrub it, and wash it down, you could probably eliminate it," he said. But, Elder added, considering that the bigger plants are processing 3,000 to 4,000 animals a day—about 300 an hour—adequate cleaning is impossible. And that is a huge problem for the public. Elder's soon-to-be published research shows that in the summertime, when *E. coli* 0157:H7 levels peak, 80 to 100 percent of the feedlot cattle he tested carried the deadly 0157:H7 strain.

Despite a public debunking of Avery's statements in the *New York Times* last February, his bogus claims continue to spread and appear to be gaining momentum. U.S. newspapers like the *Las Vegas Review-Journal, Investor's Business Daily,* and the *Journal of Commerce* have run stories about killer organic food. The story has also made its way to Canada and Europe, under headlines such as, "Organic just means it's dirtier, more expensive," "Organic food—'It's eight times more likely to kill you'" and "Organic food link to *E. coli* deaths."

Even *E. coli* expert Rob Elder said he wouldn't eat organic food or feed it to his family because it was more pathogenic. When I asked where he got that information, he sent me a copy of an Avery piece, "Organic food? No thanks!" that appeared in the *Wall Street Journal* last December. Upon further questioning, Elder said a colleague had given it to him and said that Avery worked for the CDC, so he thought it was a credible source.

I asked Sally Heinemann, the editorial director of Bridge News, if its syndicated columnists had to meet any particular criteria and whether Bridge checked the accuracy of Avery's columns. Instead of answering, she began shouting, "Who are you? Who do you represent? What do you really want to know? Go find it on the web!" before slamming the phone down.

Avery says he can pretty much say what he likes, because he works for himself as an economic forecaster to farming organizations and doesn't have to worry about anybody firing him. Referring to his past employment with the US State Department and USDA, he adds: "I have full federal retirement, and I already own the prettiest small farm in America." He considers the $35,000 a year he gets from the Hudson Institute to be very little, and says he only needs money "to carry on the mission."

Avery acknowledges that Hudson is corporate-funded. Looking over the roster of companies that have supported its work—agrichemical heavyweights like Monsanto, Du Pont, DowElanco, Sandoz and Ciba-Geigy and agribusiness giants ConAgra, Cargill, Procter & Gamble, among many others—Avery likely has no reason to fear the axe. His mission is their mission.

THE TRASHMAN SPEWETH

Since April Fool's Day of 1996, self-proclaimed public health expert Steven J. Milloy has been turning out a daily stream of anti-environmental, anti-public health commentary through his "Junk Science Home Page" on the internet (www.junkscience.com).

Adolescent sarcasm is Milloy's forte. If his targets aren't "psychologically challenged" or "bogus," they are fear-mongering "environmental extremists," "blowhards," "turkeys," "nut cases," or members of the "food police." Though he claims to trumpet "sound science," he has savagely attacked the world's most prestigious scientific journals including *Science, Nature*, the *Lancet*, and the *New England Journal of Medicine*. His chutzpah recently reached new lows with the posting (removed after complaints) of an "Obituary of the Day" that gloated over the death of former NIH environmental scientist David Rall, who was killed in a car crash.

" 'Junk science' is faulty scientific data and analysis used to further a special agenda," Milloy's website proclaims. The practitioners of junk science, he says, include environmentalists, public health and food safety regulators, anti-nuclear activists, animal rights activists, the EPA, Al Gore, people with illnesses, and anyone who dares to question the excesses of our corporate-driven industrial society.

In addition to disputing the scientific basis for these concerns, Milloy frequently accuses the questioners of tainted motives. The media, he says, uses junk science to advance particular social and political agendas. Trial lawyers use it to "bamboozle juries into awarding huge verdicts." Social activists use it to achieve social and political change. Government bureaucrats use it to fatten their budgets. Businesses use junk science to trash competitors' products or promote their own. Politicians use it to "curry favor with special interest groups or to be 'politically correct.' " Individual scientists seek fame and fortune. People who are sick, "real or imagined," draw on junk science "to blame others for causing their illness."

Conversely, "sound science" in Milloy's book seems to be any science that makes it impossible to point the finger of blame—a definition that perfectly suits many of the corporations for which he has worked. For years, Milloy was registered as a lobbyist for the EOP Group, a Washington, DC firm whose clients include the American Crop Protection Association (pesticides), the Chlorine Chemistry Council, Edison Electric Institute (fossil and nuclear energy), Fort Howard Corp. (a paper manufacturer) and the National Mining Association. The clients for whom Milloy was personally registered included Monsanto and the International Food Additives Council. Both Milloy and the EOP Group claim that he no longer works there, but he was still registered as an EOP lobbyist as recently as the summer of 1999.

In 1997 and 1998, Milloy was also executive director of The Advancement of Sound Science Coalition (TASSC), a pro-industry coalition created in 1993 to promote "sound science" in policy decision-making. TASSC, which is not currently active, claims more than 400 corporate members representing chemical, agricultural, manufacturing, oil, dairy, timber, paper and mining interests. Supporters include 3M, Amoco, Chevron, Dow Chemical, Exxon, General Motors, the Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory, Lorillard Tobacco, the Louisiana Chemical Association, the National Pest Control Association, Occidental Petroleum, Philip Morris, Procter & Gamble, Santa Fe Pacific Gold Corp., and W.R. Grace & Co.

Milloy also ran the Environmental Policy Analysis Network (EPAN), a right-wing, Washington-based think tank affiliated with the libertarian, anti-regulatory and anti-environmental movements. His website notes his authorship of a paper titled "Choices in Risk Assessment: The Role of Science Policy in the Environmental Risk Management Process," which argues that many environmental risks are minuscule and can't be proven.

Milloy is currently an "adjunct scholar" with the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank based in Washington, DC that has received funding from the American Farm Bureau Federation, several large oil companies, big tobacco, pharmaceutical giants, and agricultural chemical and biotechnology manufacturers. The Cato Institute has published two books by Milloy, *Science Without Sense* and *Silencing Science*, the latter with co-author Michael Gough, a former fellow Cato adjunct scholar.

One of Milloy's newer projects is the "Consumer Distorts" website (www.consumerdistorts.com), which alleges a "renewed emphasis on 'junk science' at *Consumer Reports*." Milloy describes the magazine's publisher, Consumers Union, as a "lobbying group that advocates extreme environmental positions" and accuses it of publishing " 'sensational' reports that advance its political agenda." He takes particular exception to the magazine's reporting on food biotech, plastics and pesticides and says its reporting is really anti-consumer, because it "needlessly alarms consumers about the safety of consumer goods" which "reduces consumer choice by scaring consumers away from products."

Aside from his daily website postings, Milloy writes opinion pieces that are picked up by dozens of newspapers and trade publications across the country, including the *New York Post*, the *Washington Times*, *New Australian*, *San Francisco Examiner*, *Detroit Free Press*, *Cincinnati Enquirer* and *Chemical and Engineering News*. In a piece picked up in October by *Business Investor's Daily*, Milloy dismisses reports on controversial aspects of food biotechnology as "little myths [that] take on epic status when reporters don't provide background."

The *Chicago Sun-Times* has also run "special reports" by Milloy that are designed to mimic news stories rather than editorials. In "Modified Crops Cause Concern," he downplays the biotech uproar in Europe, suggesting that the European public will come around to accept America's genetically modified harvest because testing is too expensive and the system is not set up to test or segregate GM and non-GM crops. In another story, titled "Study Eases Gene-altered Corn Fears," he dismisses concerns raised by the deadly effect of bioengineered Bt corn on Monarch butterflies.

Perhaps the most disturbing thing about Milloy's writing for the *Chicago Sun-Times* is the newspaper's failure to provide its readers with any information about his background as an industry flack with far-right views. It describes him simply as "a Washington-based business writer specializing in science" who "holds advanced degrees in health sciences from Johns Hopkins University and a law degree from Georgetown University." (In reality, Milloy's "advanced degrees in health sciences" consist of a bachelor's degree in natural sciences and a master's degree in biostatistics.)

In fact, many of the news stories that quote Milloy have tended to inflate or distort his credentials. He has been described in various places as a "risk expert," an "economist," "president of the Environmental Policy Analysis Network," "publisher of the junk science home page," a "consultant," a "noted junk science expert," a "statistician," and "adjunct scholar at the Cato Institute." But whatever he is called, corporate polluters know that they can depend on the Junkman to help confuse public debate, thereby preventing scrutiny of their activities and helping protect their bottom lines. ■