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Response to Walker and Lonsdale 2000. "Genetically Modified Organisms at the Crossroads"

Reasoning without Data, Default Assumptions

Michael Tillotson

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Unlike Walker and Lonsdale (2000), in Minnesota we don't consider the debate on genetically modified organisms (GMOs) to be a "dialogue of the deaf." Nor would we agree that the position of GMO proponents, i.e., the "scientists and technocrats," is supported by "hard data," while the "environmentalists" are the only ones making "alarmist claims." In Minnesota we have environmentalists who are also scientists, alarmist claims from corporate PR departments, and precious little hard data in support of either position.

Despite this lack of data, we must still evaluate assertions and make decisions. However poorly they serve as guides, reasoning and experience must take their accustomed roles in matters of such uncertainty.

One thing we might do is evaluate the credibility of any given assertion based on the quality of other assertions from the same source, using information from any context. When we read that "... it defies imagination that agribusiness would not support [labeling] ..." and "... it is in the interests of GMO agribusiness companies to help ensure that there are healthy agro-ecosystems ...," we can only conclude that the source of these statements is probably a poor predictor of agribusiness behavior. We consequently dismiss any reassurances from this source as to the negligibility of risk or the likelihood of vague, long-term benefits that would balance obvious, immediate hazards.

The theoretical benefits of GMO technology hardly enter into the debate. They are merely promises, and no more reliable than the promiser, whose motives need to be examined and whose actions would benefit from constraint.

RESPONSES TO THIS ARTICLE

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LITERATURE CITED

Walker, B., and M. Lonsdale. 2000. Genetically modified organisms at the crossroads: Comments on "Genetically Modified Crops: Risks and Promise" by Gordon Conway. *Conservation Ecology* 4(1): 12. [online] URL: <http://www.consecol.org/Journal/vol4/iss1/art12>

Address of Correspondent:

Michael Tillotson
756 Curfew St #3

St. Paul, MI 55114 USA
Phone: (651) 644-4767
miket@mr.net



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