

The GMO blockade: Goodbye to science and technology

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Opinion Plus

Ignoring scientific consensus and expelling an entire technology is a high price to pay for political convenience, argues Beat Späth.



Unshackling Innovation: Will Europe block or enable GM crops? | Photo credit: EuropaBio

Despite having contributed to its creation, Europe has expelled the fastest-adopted technology in the history of agriculture. Scientists such as Ghent University's Marc Van Montagu developed the first genetically modified (GM) plants three decades ago.

Over the last 20 years, millions of farmers have chosen to grow GM crops in countries where they are allowed to. Today, there are more farmers outside of Europe growing GM crops than there are actual farmers in the EU, and they do this on an area bigger than the EU's entire agricultural land area. Most of these farmers are smallholders in emerging economies.

In 2008, the European Commission's Joint Research Centre predicted that 91 new biotech traits would come to market by 2015 - many of them developed and delivered by public research institutions, in Europe.

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Unfortunately, this prediction was far too optimistic, and today only a small fraction of these new traits are actually available to farmers. What happened to the many products in the pipeline that could have improved nutrition and food security?

Fuelled by years of unfounded scaremongering, Europe and a few other countries have continued to deny farmers access to better crops, even when our own institutions repeatedly confirm that GMOs are at least as safe as conventionally bred crops.

Because we need soybean products to feed our farm animals, the EU has become the second largest importer of GM crops harvested in other continents. Yet the EU also delays innovation in other parts of the world by deferring authorisations for these much needed imports.

Hugely delayed or entirely blocked authorisations of safe products are the main reason why the global success of the technology is limited mainly to a few major crops provided by a relatively small number of companies.

It is virtually impossible for public researchers or smaller companies to invest the roughly 13 years and more than €100m that are required on average to put one new GM crop onto the market.

Unfortunately, this regulatory blockade hurts farmers and those in the developing world the most. They make up the majority of the population in most least-developed countries. When yields stagnate, their livelihoods stagnate.

The modernisation of agriculture has been the main contributing factor to the successful reduction in global hunger and poverty. Many humanitarian-focused biotechnology projects around the world have been set up by public research, often also in partnership with private companies. Most of these projects have been slowed, if not completely stalled, by excessive regulatory costs and uncertainty.

Too many European politicians have chosen to either side with radical activist groups that misinform the public about GMOs, or to avoid speaking up against the misinformation. I believe that ignoring the scientific consensus and farmers' needs, and expelling an entire technology is a high price to pay for political convenience.

I sincerely hope that enlightenment will ultimately trump the anti-technology inquisition in Europe.

About the author

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