

## EU Agricultural Biotech: Something's gotta give

Written by Franc Bogovič on 26 September 2019 in Opinion  
Opinion

The growing demand for food makes changing EU attitudes to GMO technology essential.



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The story of agricultural biotechnology in the EU started with high hopes and expectations 25 years ago, when Belgian Professor van Montagu and a team of researchers in Ghent created the first transgenic tobacco plant.

Since then, many European research institutes and universities have been spearheading the effort to develop new traits and crops. While everyone focused on exploring the technology, consumers acceptance was not considered.

When the first genetically modified (GM) crops arrived in the US in 1996, the EU was suddenly confronted with the first GM soybean imports.

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There was huge public concern, mostly focused on consumer safety, catching industry unawares. The industry had simply failed to communicate their work openly and transparently. This saw a prompt decline in enthusiasm and support for the technology and an exodus of European agricultural biotechnology science and innovation.

Europe has now resorted to doing biosafety research for the world, while innovation was taking place elsewhere.

While biotechnology innovation in the EU stood still for many years, the world changed rapidly, with more uncertainty than ever.

Global trade of food and feed commodities is less obvious, and questions resurface on protein self-sufficiency and reliance on imports.

We are right to be ambitious with our bio-economy and developing green chemistry products, but we still have to determine how we can guarantee a constant flow of accessible feedstock.

Climate change also poses a formidable challenge, forcing us to make difficult choices. The IPCC has predicted that the negative impacts on major crop yields around the world will far outweigh any potential benefits of climate change.

This change is happening so rapidly that new solutions for farmers and newly-adapted varieties are more important than ever.

“For me, it is essential that we have real trust between consumers and producers. Nothing is more destructive for our economy than mistrust”

Despite new pests and diseases appearing in our fields, society is no longer willing to roll out the red carpet for pesticides. This leaves our farmers with fewer options at the very moment that they need new solutions to produce high quality food and feed sustainably.

Also, the technology hasn't stood still. In fact, biotechnology research is rapidly gaining momentum across many sectors. This opens up new possibilities in healthcare, industrial applications and agriculture.

The EU is well-positioned to capture some of the benefits of these innovations, but it has to find a good way to enable them.

For me, it is essential that we have real trust between consumers and producers. Nothing is more

destructive for our economy than mistrust.

This is why I believe traceability will be a key term in the discussions around biotechnology. If the consumer can easily trace the origin of a product and simultaneously understand the technology used to produce that product, we give them a free and fair choice.

On one hand we want to avoid a situation where people receive the impression of being cheated, while on the other we must make sure that the production technologies are safe for consumers.

Naturally, this should also be in the interest of producers. It is becoming clear that with an ever-increasing world population, we cannot forgo the advantages of biotechnology.

Like all the ecologically righteous among us, we want it all: enough protein to feed 8 billion people as vegetarians while producing CO2-neutral food.

Anyone who points to the fact that 'something's gotta give' is an evil industry supporter and world destroyer.

Technology can, and must, be one of the solutions to this conundrum. Returning to a lifestyle of hunter-gatherers cannot be the right answer.

### **About the author**

Franc Bogovič (SL/EPP) is a substitute member of the parliament's AGRI committee

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