

## **PUBLIC ACCEPTANCE OF AGRICULTURAL BIOTECHNOLOGY: EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION**

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**W**elcome to *AgBioForum*, the on-line magazine that brings you timely information, expert opinion and research on the social and economic aspects of agricultural biotechnology. Our first issue is devoted to the topic of public acceptance of agro-biotechnology, a topic that produced front-page material long before any commercial product was in sight.

Trends in public attitudes toward agro-biotechnology have been traced and analyzed in many countries around the globe. Over the years, there have been concerns about perceived environmental and food safety risks from the use of biotechnology. There have also been ethical and religious concerns about the right of humans to “interfere” with the order of the natural world or patent life. At the same time, there has been anticipation for increased food and fiber production for a burgeoning world population, reduced pollution, improved food quality and other potential benefits from agro-biotechnology. There should be little doubt that the occasional balance of such perceptions has influenced the public debate on an appropriate regulatory framework for implementing agro-biotechnologies. Similarly, decisions on the relevant regulatory framework have shaped the technology itself and its public acceptance.

Commercial introduction of agro-biotechnology products in the last few years has forced decisions, often amid controversy. In the last two months alone, the European Union (EU) had to decide whether to allow production and importation of certain agro-biotechnology products and how such products should be labeled. Similarly, voters in Switzerland decided in a referendum to not outlaw experimentation with and patenting of biotechnology products. Clearly, such key decisions have determinant effects on where agro-biotechnology products are invented and produced, how they are distributed, what information accompanies them through the food distribution system and who controls the information. Deciding on appropriate policy, therefore, is not only about what safety rules are implemented and how consumer sovereignty is safeguarded but also about how innovation benefits and structural impacts are distributed across regions, countries, sectors, industries and even individual players.

The public debate on the implementation of agro-biotechnology will continue. The EU likely will continue to see more than its share of controversy and overtones. As regulatory policies for agro-biotechnology remain in flux, political posturing and positioning among advocates and opponents will continue. Having decided on a stable regulatory framework does not end the controversy. In the U.S., the Food and Drug Administration was recently sued by a U.S. environmental and

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religious coalition for, allegedly, violating religious freedom and endangering public health through its labeling policy. As commercialization of agro-biotechnology has forced decisions upon policy makers and consumers alike, a rational and transparent public debate is essential.

In this issue of *AgBioForum*, academic and industry experts from the U.S., Canada and Europe contribute insights to advance the public debate:

- Hoban and Zechendorf review accumulated empirical evidence on public attitudes towards agro-biotechnology and propose explanations about observed differences across social groups and geographic regions. Their conclusions have significant implications about processes and information that may be necessary for arriving at consensus in different parts of the world.
- Miller and Chess discuss the emotional dimension of public attitudes and draw conclusions about ways for effectively addressing such a dimension.
- Caswell, and Phillips and Isaac, discuss various schemes of labeling and their social desirability. Loader and Henson, review the public debate on labeling agro-biotechnology products in the U.K., a country sensitized to food safety issues by the recent BSE crisis.
- Marshall provides some initial evidence about how consumers have actually responded to labeled agro-biotechnology products offered in the market.
- Caulder predicts future public attitudes towards agro-biotechnology by drawing parallels between agro-biotechnology and other technologies that are broadly adopted.