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Biotech shows promise

Quality of life, and agriculture, may be improved through emmerging science

Bob Krauter

Capital Press California Editor

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The horseless carriage, frozen peas, microwave ovens and jet airliners. Many technological and scientific advances once feared, have become mainstays in improving our quality of life.

People today are living longer, healthier, happier lives than ever for a variety of reasons, but there is no doubt that we are benefactors of science, technology and innovation. But not all people see change as a good thing, especially when it comes to biotechnology.

Anti-biotech activists in recent years have fanned out across the country to target biotech crops, using terms like "Frankenfoods" to create doubt, alarm and fear in the public and support for state and county bans against the technology.

They have pushed for outright bans on biotech crops and onerous labeling laws to tag biotech as the boogeyman lurking in kitchen pantries. The anti-biotech spin is we shouldn't fool with Mother Nature.

Anything "natural" or produced through natural selection is good and superior to anything that can be selected or improved by man.

In the past few years, dozens of California counties have grappled with the question, "Is biotechnology good or bad?"

Four have adopted anti-biotech ordinances — Mendocino, Trinity, Marin and most recently, Santa Cruz. Voters in four counties have dumped biotech bans and there have even been some counties that have passed pro-biotech measures.

As California's experience seems to indicate, the biotech rebellion has not created the groundswell that activists had hoped.

But that hasn't stopped some states from passing laws to require a uniform, statewide policy on biotech agriculture.

Laws have been passed in more than 10 states and many other state legislatures, including California's, are currently considering similar measures.

Senate Bill 1056, authored by state Sen. Dean Florez, D-Shafter, Calif., recently passed the Assembly Agriculture Committee. It has support of Assembly members Barbara Matthews and Bill Maze and more than a dozen of their colleagues in the Senate and Assembly.

The bill clarifies that the California Department of Food and Agriculture has the authority to regulate what seeds and nursery plants can be grown in the state. It would provide some sense of sanity in the debate that is pitting county against county.

It reinforces the oversight role governing what can legally be grown in the state and, importantly, it provides some assurances to farmers who may be shying away from which crops to plant for fear that they may become prohibited in the future.

The Legislature can and should restore calm and common sense to the biotech debate, and pass this bill into law. But a new law should not stifle the ongoing discussion to determine how society can be use biotech to enhance our quality of life.

We should strive to ask the question — “How can we best use this technology to benefit mankind in the future?”

To date, the greatest and most notable impact of biotechnology has been in the medical and pharmaceutical fields.

More than 200 million people worldwide have benefited from hundreds of diagnostics, therapeutics and vaccines produced by the biomedical biotechnology industry.

Scientists are currently investigating applications of advanced gene therapy to address hereditary disorders, cancer and recalcitrant infectious diseases like AIDS.

Scientists are exploring new ways to develop better medicines, new ways to produce more and better foods and ways to detect and mitigate environmental contaminants through biotechnology.

One of the societal benefits of biotechnology is greater protection of the environment.

A two-year study in the May 4 online version of the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences showed biotech cotton resisted the damaging pink bollworm while having no harmful impact on benign insects.

The wise use of biotechnology can improve crop yields, cut the use of pesticides and herbicides and reduce the amount of land needed to be cleared for food production to feed the world's population.

Each new venture in history has produced its share doomsayers and doubters and biotech is no exception.

Christopher Columbus had trouble convincing Europeans that the earth was round and that his ships would not fall off the edge of the world before they reached America's shores.

It is incumbent on all — regulators, local governing bodies, the biotech industry, farmers and members of the general public — to work together to address questions about the risks and benefits of biotech.

Only through sorting through the facts and addressing concerns that people have can we truly benefit from an exciting technology that promises to change the quality of life of people in ways never imagined just a few years ago.

Bob Krauter is the Capital Press California editor based in Sacramento. Reach him via e-mail at bkrauter@capitalpress.com.

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