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## Anti-Biotech Film a 'Crockumentary'

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By Steven Milloy

The biotech scare is back – or, at least, a new movie is trying to bring it back. Playing in small movie houses, “The Future of Food” dusts off, and presents in ominous fashion, all the Greens’ long-discredited arguments against agricultural biotechnology.

Produced by Deborah Koons Garcia, the widow of the Grateful Dead’s Jerry Garcia, the movie’s overriding themes are allegations that biotech crops and food are unsafe and that a government-industry cabal is foisting dangerous products on an unwitting public.

Nothing could be farther from the truth.

Biotech crops and foods are among the most thoroughly tested products available. No other food crops in history have been so thoroughly tested and regulated. Before biotech products are marketed, they undergo years of safety testing including thousands of tests for potential toxicity, allergenicity and effects on non-target insects and the environment.

“The Future of Food,” for example, dredges up the 2000 scare involving a biotech corn that had not yet been approved for human consumption but that was detected in Taco Bell taco shells. A few consumers, egged on by anti-biotech activists, alleged the corn caused allergic reactions. But the movie glossed over the fact that the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention tested those consumers and reported there was no evidence that the biotech corn caused any allergic reaction in anyone.

Another long-buried myth excavated by Garcia was that biotechnology harms biodiversity. But so far it doesn’t appear to represent any greater risk to biodiversity than conventional agriculture and it actually seems to have some demonstrable beneficial impacts on biodiversity.

An infamous biodiversity scare featured in the movie involved Monarch butterflies. The scare occurred during 1999-2000 when the media trumpeted alarmist results from two laboratory studies reporting that biotech corn might harm Monarch butterfly larvae. Subsequent field studies soon debunked the scare, reporting that Monarch larvae actually fared better inside biotech cornfields than in natural areas because of less pressure from predators. Needless to say, Monarchs in biotech cornfields also did much better than those in conventional cornfields sprayed with insecticides.

The movie claims that once biotech crops are planted, control over them is lost and they “contaminate” non-biotech or organic crops. This is misleading since 100 percent purity has never been the reality in agriculture. Biological systems are dynamic environments, meaning that regardless of the method of production -- conventional, organic or biotech -- trace levels of other materials are always present in seed

and grain. Since all commercial biotech traits are fully approved by U.S. regulatory agencies, their presence -- in large amounts or trace amounts -- is fully legal and safe.

With respect to organic farmers, the Department of Agriculture's rules for organic products specifically say that the certification of organic products is *process-based* -- meaning that if the proper *processes* are followed, the unintended presence of non-organic or biotech traits doesn't disqualify the product from being labeled as "organic."

To date, biotech crops haven't harmed organic farmers. The coexistence of biotech, conventional and organic corn, soybean, and canola has been effectively working since 1995, when the first biotech crops were introduced. During that period, in fact, both biotech and organic farming have grown remarkably.

Garcia wants movie viewers to overlook the fact that U.S. regulators -- including the Department of Agriculture, Environmental Protection Agency and the Food and Drug Administration -- have established a robust framework and rigorous process for evaluating biotech product safety. Developers spend years generating data for one product to be submitted for approval.

A major take-home message of the movie is that consumers should demand labeling of biotech foods. But this would only increase the cost of food production while failing to provide any meaningful information to consumers. Biotech crops have been determined by regulators to be essentially equivalent to those of conventional crops. Corn is corn, in other words, no matter what anti-biotech activists would have us believe.

While emphasizing "scare," the movie overlooks biotechnology's advantages. Biotech crops require less tilling. This reduces soil erosion; improves moisture retention; increases populations of soil microorganisms, earthworms and beneficial insects; and reduces sediment runoff into streams.

The movie mocks biotechnology's potential value to the developing world, characterizing the argument as one designed for public relations use. But biotech crops such as "golden rice" could help with the severe Vitamin A deficiency that afflicts hundreds of millions in Africa and Asia, including 500,000 children who lose their eyesight each year.

As pointed out by Greenpeace co-founder Patrick Moore, now a vociferous critic of the activist group, "Greenpeace activists threaten to rip the biotech rice out of the fields if farmers dare to plant it. They have done everything they can to discredit the scientists and the technology.

"A commercial variety is now available for planting, but it will be at least five years before Golden Rice will be able to work its way through the Byzantine regulatory system that has been set up as a result of the activists' campaign of misinformation and speculation," Moore said. "So the risk of not allowing farmers in Africa and Asia to grow Golden Rice is that another 2.5 million children will probably go blind."

Garcia's "The Future of Food" is steeped in the Greens' tragic campaign of misinformation. Many long-time anti-biotech campaigners helped her make the movie, in which not a balancing thought or counter-opinion is presented.

The "Future of Food" purports to be a "documentary" -- a movie that sticks to the facts. It doesn't. Hollywood will need a new Oscar category for this one. How about "crockumentary"?

*Steven Milloy publishes [JunkScience.com](http://JunkScience.com) and [CSRwatch.com](http://CSRwatch.com), is adjunct scholar at the Cato Institute, and is the author of [Junk Science Judo: Self-defense Against Health Scares and Scams](#) (Cato Institute, 2001).*

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