



The Online Division of The Sacramento Bee

This story is taken from [Business](#) at [sacbee.com](#).

Easing fears of biotech food

Why industry opposes labels for genetically modified crops

By Jim Wasserman -- Bee Staff Writer

Published 2:15 am PST Monday, February 20, 2006

Story appeared in Business section, Page D1

Nineteen months ago Sean Darragh, a former U.S. defense, national security and trade official, became a leading promoter and new public face of the global agricultural biotechnology industry.

Representing more than 1,100 biotech companies, academic institutions and state research centers, Darragh travels the planet as head of food and agriculture for the Biotechnology Industry Organization in Washington, D.C.

As chief spokesman for a decade-old and still controversial technology used on 1 billion acres of farmland worldwide, Darragh tries to reassure a sometimes skeptical public that genetically modified food is both safe and good for the environment.

U.S. farmers grow mostly herbicide-resistant corn, soybeans, cotton, canola, squash and papaya on 123 million acres.

Darragh recently stopped by The Bee to talk about pressures to label biotech food for consumers, continuing safety concerns of public interest groups and his own faith in biotech science.

Q: Tell us what you do.

A: My role is to talk to folks and talk about the technology. We recognize as an industry that things are evolving quickly in biotechnology and that anytime you have a new technology folks want to be sure that it's safe and it's something that they're comfortable with. Part of what we do is try to make people comfortable with it.

Q: Does your industry advocate labeling products if biotech products are put in them?

A: We do not support the labeling of biotech products. The idea being that scientists, the American Medical Association and all the regulatory bodies in the U.S. and the European commission that oversee this, have all said the technology is safe. Our concern with putting on a label saying that the products were made with genetic modification is that it raises, from our perspective, the concern that there must be a reason. It's almost like a warning sign. If science says genetically modified products are safe and our government is saying they're safe, what is the reason for putting a label on it that says they're genetically modified other than to say there's some reason why?

Q: Have you done studies over a long period of time to say whether people who eat more genetically modified foods get more cancers or get more of other diseases than people who eat more organically grown food? Have those sorts of studies been done?

A: Ten years have gone by without one documented case of any problem associated with the technology. ... I've never met anybody with a science degree, who has a Ph.D. in biology, ever, who was not comfortable with the safety of biotechnology.

Does that mean you shouldn't be cautious? I'm not saying that. ... We have been modifying plants for tens of thousand of years. In biotech we're going in and saying this is the gene we want to transfer, and we're ensuring that it transfers and nothing else does. It's a more precise way of doing what (19th century Austrian monk and founder of genetics Gregor) Mendel did with peas moons and moons ago.

Our fear is that by putting a label on it that says GMO (genetically modified organism) it's like a skull and crossbones. We don't think the science justifies it.

Q: The government has approved things that it said were safe and later were found to be harmful.

A: If I had a conversation with anybody with a Ph.D. in biology and they could articulate why they were concerned about it and why this technology is any different than the stuff that's been happening for years - like Mendel's peas - then I could understand. But there's nobody out there. I think part of the problem is we haven't done a very good, or as good a job as we could, with making people feel comfortable with the technology. I think it's a failure on our part.

Q: Many Europeans cite the precautionary principle. They say, "Prove it's safe rather than tell us it hasn't been proved unsafe."

A: Part of the problem existing today in Europe is they had a number of failures in their system, whether it was BSE (mad cow disease) or other things.

It appears they weren't transparent with their population and there were a number of regulatory and governmental organizations charged with safety that lost credibility with the population. ... I think as a whole most Americans think the FDA (U.S. Food and Drug Administration) does a good job doing their best to keep our food supply safe and good. And the Europeans don't have the same faith in their food safety system that we do. That's why it's a little easier here for the technology than it is in Europe.

Q: With labeling, isn't there a fear that groups like the Center for Food Safety would ramp up a campaign and urge people to boycott those foods?

A: Here's an analysis. Just the other day in the Wall Street Journal was an article by (former U.S. President) Jimmy Carter talking about the technology. Most Americans think Jimmy Carter is a straight shooter. He's going to tell you what he believes, and it comes from the heart.

He's coming out and saying he's a mainstream American leader, who has proven his worth to the nation and the world, and he's coming out and talking about it. I think there will be more politicians and thought leaders that come out in the next few years that will do something similar.

Q: Sonoma County voters just rejected a ban on biotech crops. What was your reaction to that?

A: I think Californians and people in general should choose their destiny. That's what we are about. We want to have freedom of choice. Am I happy the vote went the way it did? Yes.

Q: What do you fear most that could bring this technology to a halt?

A: I have faith in the scientific community, and if you look at challenges we're facing, feeding the world or providing fuel for the future, biotechnology is a major part of the solution to that. We need to move forward and have appropriate regulatory regimes to make sure we don't have problems. But we have challenges we have to deal with, and this is a path that is going to get us where we need to go. I don't think I'm going to wake up in the morning, and there's going to be something that's going to stop it.

SEAN DARRAGH

Executive vice president for food and agriculture, Biotechnology Industry Organization

Appointed: Aug. 9, 2004

Previous positions: Deputy vice president of international affairs, Pharmaceutical Research and Manufacturers of America; principal deputy assistant secretary of defense; principal negotiator, Office of U.S. Trade Representative; senior adviser to the deputy secretary of the U.S. Treasury; director for global issues and multilateral affairs, National Security Council staff

Source: Biotechnology Industry Organization

About the writer:

- The Bee's Jim Wasserman can be reached at (916) 321-1102 or jwasserman@sacbee.com.

<http://www.sacbee.com/content/business/story/14211377p-15037501c.html>

This article is protected by copyright and should not be printed or distributed for anything except personal use.
The Sacramento Bee, 2100 Q St., P.O. Box 15779, Sacramento, CA 95852
Phone: (916) 321-1000

[Copyright © The Sacramento Bee](#)