

EU STILL SPOOKED OVER BIOTECH



When I first started writing about biotech issues nine years ago, the European Union (EU) was up in arms about allowing

genetically modified organism (GMO) crops into their countries. Today, things haven't changed that much.

Although a few soybean varieties and corn hybrids have made it through the EU import approval process, there hasn't been wholesale acceptance of those crops in the EU like in most of the world. In fact, biotech crop plantings worldwide increase by double digits every year. Last year, there was a 12% growth in acres worldwide, according to ISAAA.

KONRAD LIEBCHEN, a farmer from eastern Austria who I recently visited, says: "GMO is an issue for Austrian consumers. They don't want GMOs in food. We even have dairies and some beef operations that have established GMO-free brands."

Although Liebchen is a producer with only 85 acres and 20 beef cows, he's considered an average farmer by Austrian standards. Two-thirds of his fellow farmers are part time and 80% of farmers are in environmental farming programs, he says. Those programs are heavily subsidized.

Still, when it comes to implementing new technology, Liebchen says, "I don't feel like I'm falling behind because of our position on *no* GMOs."

Franz Fischler, Austrian and EU Commissioner of Agriculture 1995-2004, does wonder whether it's a risky proposition that Europe

doesn't keep up with biotech technology. "For me, it's what can be done to base the GMO discussion on facts rather than ideology. Also, we shouldn't ignore the problems ahead of us, especially with biotech and how it relates to biofuels."

When discussing biotech and food safety, it gets down to risk, Fischler says. "We're giving consumers the idea that there actually is zero risk. So how long can we wait for GM technology? For example, where would we be if we'd have waited for industrial revolution technology to not have risk."

The paradox, Fischler points out, is "if consumers can buy non-GMO food for the same price as GMO food, why should they buy non-GMO?"

In Europe the environmental lobby has done a terrific job of scaring consumers over biotech, according to Michael Mann, director of general communication for the European Commission. "There's enormous concern in the consumer press about safety issues (with biotech)," he says. "EU consumers are worried."

So as long as consumers speak out and the EU can financially compensate farmers enough to keep the bulk of the biotech crops at bay, don't expect them to budge on their position. Biotech isn't going to catch on in the EU like I thought it would when I started writing for this magazine.

With an affluent world population that needs more and more food, let's hope with the help of biotech that the rest of the non-EU world can produce it. **CSD**

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