

COMMENTARY ON THE ENVIRONMENT

Novartis' new labeling policy creates confusion

Russ Hoyle

In late February, Wolfgang Samo, the head of agribusiness for newly formed giant Novartis (Basel), made waves in the biotechnology industry by announcing that his company would henceforth label "all its genetically modified products for consumers," as a company press release put it. Speaking at a conference entitled "Regulation of Crop Production and its Implication for the Food Supply" at Tufts University (Medford, MA), Samo's remarks, which emphasized the critical importance of environmentally sound and sustainable crop production as well as high-tech product innovation, left more than one conference participant puzzled about the substance of Novartis' apparently groundbreaking new labeling policy.

How did Novartis propose, for example, to label its Maximizer corn, a pesticidal seed product genetically modified to resist the European corn borer, so that "consumers" would know it was genetically engineered? Why would Novartis fly in the face of accepted science by pretending that genetically engineered products materially differed from products of conventional genetic manipulation? If by consumer the company meant the end-of-the-line purchaser in the grocery store buying corn products, this was truly a radical proposal. Had Novartis figured out how to segregate its product through the various incarnations of production so that it could clearly label products for curious housewives?

The reality turns out to be far more mundane. In fact, Samo's high-profile labeling policy, according to company insiders, will only involve two genetically modified products, the Maximizer *Bacillus thuringiensis* corn seed, developed by Ciba Geigy and Mycogen, and Novartis' Bt 11 corn seed, a similar product developed by Northrup-King. The consumers Samo and Novartis are talking about are farmers in the US and Europe who will receive bags of corn seed bearing labels simply informing them of the added value and quality of genetically enhanced seed and reminding them that fields planted with such corn will not require conventional pesticides.

Novartis' position on labeling is "the same position on labeling as the rest of the industry and the US government," says a company official. "It is product-based and will identify scientific risk associated with the product" as determined by the regulatory process. In the case of Novartis' Maximizer and Bt 11 corn seeds, there are no "materially significant" risks involved.

Why all the fuss, then? Samo's remarks

come at a time of increasing sensitivity in the biotechnology industry about public perceptions of genetically engineered products. The Organics Board of the US Department of Agriculture (Washington, DC) is reportedly poised to make a determination formally distinguishing genetically modified products

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from organic crop products. In addition, the relation of organic food to bioengineered food also was on the agenda at the Ottawa Codex Alimentarius meeting in mid-April.

And last, but surely not least, to the marketing wizards responsible for the fate of Novartis' new Bt pesticidal corn products in Europe, the European Community's semantically torturous conciliation on novel foods will require labeling of "live" genetically engineered products or foods "not equivalent to existing foods." From this critical perspective, labeling Novartis' two genetically "enhanced" agriproducts for the European market was a must. And, as experience marketing commodities such as milk manufactured from Monsanto's Posilac bovine somatotropin (BST) has strongly suggested, labeling genetically engineered products can have highly favorable consequences for marketing conventional, or organic, products, such as Novartis' other lines of crop seeds.

In his Tufts remarks, however, Samo seemed to have a larger target in mind. There are real scientific uncertainties associated with Novartis' innovative corn seed products. Their use, for example, will eventually mean the development of tougher, more resistant corn borers. In the case of Maximizer, the slim possibility exists that an ampicillin-resistance marker gene could be somehow transmitted into the environment. Such uncertainties, associated in the public mind with innovative biotechnology products, seem to be the broad focus of Samo's overblown labeling policy.

"Sensitivity about the form of food production should not surprise us," Samo told the gathering of academics, executives and regulators. "Developed countries are accustomed to overabundance" and "can afford 'organic farming'. In that kind of luxury, nostalgia for a less intensive agriculture is understandable. We have to recognize it for what it is: Memories of a golden past, which kept some in plenty, but many in a state of hunger." Rather, Samo argued, "constructive cooperation" between regulators, industry, and consumers was essential if sustainable, high-yield, environmentally sound food production was the goal. The industry in short had to steer a realistic passage between "the politics of fear of the unknown" and "a zero risk approach."

For Samo, the key to Novartis' approach was a reconstituted partnership "between the scientist and the man in the street." The purpose, he cautioned, was "to place risk in its proper context, along with the benefits which a given innovation is expected to bring in terms of higher quality of life, sustainable economic growth and wealth generation." He called for scientists to "come out of their ivory towers" and for "transparency" in labeling "new genetically modified products."

"Genetically enhanced products are superior to conventional ones," declared Samo. "Industry should have many reasons to label them. Novartis, for one, is doing just this. If we believe in the 'right to choose' for consumers, the industry cannot reasonably argue against labels facilitating this choice." That was it. Samo marshaled private public opinion polls that, he said, "were far more favorable to bioengineering than I had anticipated" to justify Novartis' approach, noting that "in the field of public opinion... ignorance breeds skepticism and negativity." He concluded: "Bioengineering is viewed by many as a very desirable alternative to increased use of chemical pesticides. Labeling is a clear winner."

Perhaps. But the grandness of Samo's vision of a partnership between biotechnology and the consumer is somewhat belied by the perfunctoriness of the labeling policy, such as it is. Samo's rhetoric is right-minded. But will it begin to close the gap between biotechnology and suspicious consumers, who will be none the wiser whether they are eating genetically engineered Novartis corn or not? In reality, the answer is probably not, and it probably doesn't matter. But playing both sides of the street as Samo and Novartis are doing probably won't help either. ///