

Michael Fernandez

With a healthy dose of skepticism and a penchant for science policy, Michael Fernandez wades into the contentious issue of agricultural biotech regulation. He talks about how to move a polarized debate forward and the constant challenge of remaining neutral in Washington, DC.

When Michael Fernandez took over as director of the Pew Initiative on Food and Biotechnology (PIFB) in September 2005, his former boss bequeathed to him a lava lamp for his desk. Oddly enough, the lamp had been the prize for a Halloween costume that parodied Fernandez' image as a dapper science nerd.

Fernandez' colleagues say his ability to not take himself too seriously is just one part of an arsenal of people skills that helps him steer the PIFB, a nonprofit unbiased group, through the sea of special interests in the debate on the proper use and regulation of food biotech products.

It also helps that Fernandez brings to the job a deep knowledge of the regulatory process from a decade of working for Congress, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and the US Department of Agriculture (USDA). Not to mention his appreciation of corporate biotech interests, influenced in part by his father who was once chairman of the board at chemical giant Monsanto of St Louis. On a more personal level, Fernandez is an unusual mix of skeptic, family man, sharp dresser and someone so trustworthy, you could have him babysit your newborn.

As dictated by its founder, the Pew Charitable Trusts, the mission of PIFB is to stimulate the discussion on regulation by providing unbiased information for decision makers and holding public forums on the issues. The catch is that PIFB cannot advocate specific policy recommendations and cannot lobby Congress for particular legislative changes. But is such a position tractable in the partisan waters of Washington, DC?

"Pew was taking a bit of a gamble," when it established PIFB in 2001, says Fernandez, who joined the team then as director of science. "Traditionally, if you are trying to influence a policy arena, the most direct way is by being an advocacy organization." Balancing in the middle of a policy debate and convening people is more uncommon.

"Without organizations like this, there would never be a dialog between the business and NGO communities," says Sean Darragh, executive vice president of food & agriculture at the Biotechnology Industry Organization (BIO) in Washington, DC. Although those two sides may not change each others' minds, he says, the PIFB forums offer an invaluable public vetting of competing views "like a presidential debate."

It has not always been easy, however, to convince stakeholders that emerging technologies and concerns were ready for the public spotlight. That's where Fernandez' reputation as fair, trustworthy and equally skeptical of differing arguments has come in handy. He also takes a "no viewpoint left behind" approach, says Sally McCammon, science advisor at the USDA's Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service.

Fernandez says getting a broad range of stakeholders around the table has been one of PIFB's key successes. "We've gotten key players from all perspectives to sit down and talk—not always happily or without conflict—and we've made it acceptable to have a different kind of discussion." To do that, Fernandez and PIFB work tirelessly to cultivate relationships with all types of stakeholders, reassuring them of their impartiality. Fernandez has thus earned the respect of almost everyone in the agbiotech arena.

"You can't just hang a shingle out that says, 'Pew Initiative: We're Neutral,'" notes, Michael Dykes, vice president of government affairs for Monsanto. "It takes time to maintain neutrality—that credibility is

earned." Dykes says that he feels he can call Fernandez to discuss an issue and be heard out fairly—just as any stakeholder could. And he's equally tough on everyone.

"People perceive that he gives everybody the business," says Kathleen Merrigan, professor of public policy at Tufts University in Boston. Merrigan hired Fernandez into his first science policy position in 1991 with the US Senate Agricultural Committee and says that that work trained Fernandez to "look across different rhetoric and framings of an issue and boil it down to its essence."

That fairness helps engage biotech industry, government regulators, organic farmers, consumer advocates and investment bankers in a process that has been by many accounts successful in changing the nature of the biotech debate in the US. Fernandez admits that measuring that success is difficult and qualitative, but possible nonetheless.

In the late 1990s, "if you said anything about the benefits of biotechnology you were an apologist hack and if you said anything negative you were a Luddite," he says. "We do both those things and we are neither of those things." PIFB's presence has changed the way groups are talking, according to Fernandez, pointing out that BIO now promotes having a strong regulatory system to ensure consumer confidence—something unimaginable just eight years ago.

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Others note that PIFB has highlighted gaps in the regulatory system for new types of products in the research pipeline, such as pharmaceutical products in plants. "They've helped point out where things might be done better to the government agencies," says Gregory Jaffe, director of biotechnology at the Center for Science in the Public Interest, a Washington, DC-based nutrition advocacy group. Indeed, Fernandez points to the 2002 conference "Pharming the Field," which helped spur some federal regulatory changes outlining the safety review process and environmental containment rules for drugs produced in crops.

But there is a sense of frustration from NGOs that PIFB, and Pew monies, could be more effective by taking a stance on policy recommendations. "They haven't gone that next step of advocating—it's that extra 20% that really solves a problem," says Jaffe. Ultimately, PIFB cannot force the hand of regulators, critics of biotech or industry leaders.

The legacy of the Pew Initiative will more likely be indirect, but longer lasting. Merrigan holds up the relationship building that PIFB and Fernandez have done as their major contribution. She says, "You don't see it on the front page of the *Washington Post*, but it's the little moments of trust building that set the stage for those phone calls between sides when they really have to happen. They've planted the seed."

Kendall Powell, Denver