

nature biotechnology

Hearts and minds

The nonprofit Pew Initiative on Food and Biotechnology is closing, but the need for an independent and neutral body to facilitate dialog on US biotech policy has never been greater.

For the past six years, the Pew Initiative on Food and Biotechnology has provided a unique sounding board for stakeholders engaged in the contentious debate on policy oversight of agricultural biotech products in the United States. When it closes its doors next month, one of the main US outlets for open discussion of the complex economic, legal, societal, regulatory and political issues surrounding these products will disappear. Pew has served a central role in curbing the excesses of debates about biotech and its products. Its closure will create a dangerous vacuum that will probably be filled by ludicrous hyperbole unless something more structured is put in place first.

Pew was created in 2001 by the Pew Charitable Trusts, through an initial grant of \$11.9 million to the University of Richmond (later extended to \$17.4 million). At the time, agbiotech was seemingly mired in controversy: Monsanto was widely portrayed as a corporate bully, railroading its products onto world markets opened up by the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade; Starlink corn had just been discovered in the human food supply; and public antagonism to agbiotech products across the Atlantic was setting European legislators firmly on the path to confrontation with the United States.

Against this background, Pew was established as an independent and objective source of credible information on agbiotech for the public, media and policymakers. It has produced over 20 reports, fact sheets and briefings that cover anything from safety issues to the social, economic, political or ethical impacts of genetically manipulated flora and fauna—from transgenic trees to cloned cows (<http://pewagbiotech.org/research/>). One of its major contributions was a deep, critical analysis of the US Coordinated Framework, which highlighted potential loopholes and gray areas for current and future products. This, together with a 'Legislative Tracker' database collating available data for ongoing US state-level legislative initiatives pertinent to biotech products helped establish Pew as the go-to resource for neutral and trustworthy information on agbiotech.

But it is Pew's success in bringing together stakeholders with divergent opinions that is likely to be its most valuable but fragile legacy. This was achieved, despite initial reservations on the part of industry that it might be 'ambushed' by opponents when participating on such panels. One of the earliest and most ambitious initiatives, the Stakeholder Forum, assembled representatives from industry, academia, consumer and environmental groups in an attempt to find consensus on recommendations that would enhance US regulatory oversight of agbiotech products. Although this effort ultimately foundered in May 2003 without achieving consensus, many participants felt the exercise provided a richer understanding of other stakeholders and helped build professional relationships for the future.

One criticism of Pew is that too often it placed undue emphasis on the perceived risks of recombinant technology without providing sufficient context on the risks of other conventional approaches, creating

an impression of controversy where none exists. What's more, to get people with divergent views to sit around the same table, Pew provided all comers with equal time and weight in the policy discussion, regardless of whether their opinions were backed by scientific data; in some instances, detractors argued this gave certain viewpoints more credence and validation than they deserved.

But those who dogmatically dismiss a dialog on biotech products because it strays outside science are fundamentally in error. The discussion has moved beyond inventions or discoveries or regulatory systems. It involves products. And biotech products, like the products of any other business, need markets—markets where the values expressed by consumers clearly trump scientific arguments every time. One need look no further than what has happened in Europe in recent years. Although industry did an abysmal job of preparing the political and professional ground for the arrival of its products, the real benefits of the technology to agriculture and the environment were lost because consumer values were ignored. And when public acceptance and trust collapsed, serious support for the products evaporated. Food companies and politicians alike rely on branding, and neither can afford to sully their image through intervention in a values debate that doesn't appear to be winnable.

Now that Pew's funding is coming to an end, the biotech industry must ask itself whether it needs a neutral and independent US forum to continue a broad and inclusive policy debate for its next generation of products. We would argue it does. The issues aren't going to go away. Indeed, at least three key drivers will ensure that debates become more frequent and more complex.

Biotech products are moving on from simple modifications of plant cells to manipulation of mammalian and even human cells, encroaching further into areas of moral or psychological discomfort. Then, there is the increasing speed with which information and misinformation about biotech products is traveling electronically around the globe in e-mails and blogs and chat rooms. This means opinions are likely to become more entrenched more quickly, often on the basis of flimsier evidence, and industry will need a means of anticipating controversies and responding more rapidly. And finally, the increasing internationalization of trade and technical capability will mean that new biotech products will be adopted by economies somewhere, even if the US or Europe remains embroiled in an ethical/policy debate.

Industry's preference for working behind the scenes and in the lobby halls is all very well. But the value debate is also part of market reality. These issues need to be addressed in a moderating body similar to Pew's. Waiting until they are raised by a congressional committee loaded with opponents, when public opinion is antagonistic and the media starts to smell blood will be too late. By then, the battle for heart and minds will already have been lost.