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THE FIRST WORD/

FRANKENFOOD . . . OR FRANK DISCUSSION?

The U.S. Food and Drug Administration's recent policy statement on the labeling of foods derived from recombinant organisms has stirred up widespread public—and industry—discusion of biotechnology. "Frankenfood" even made it to the front page of our local newspaper.

Our own analysis—that FDA's policy is fundamentally correct and affords biotechnology an opportunity to build loyalty by going the extra mile and declaring itself proudly on its products—has itself evoked discussion, most of it critical.

For example, a friend called today to castigate our limited vision. It seems there's a big difference between labeling "identity preserved" products—like Calgene's cellophane-wrapped Flavr Savr tomatoes (tomatos? ah, to "e" or not to "e," that is the question these days)—and keeping track of the ingredients in such bulk-processed commodities as flour and tomato sauce. Consider flour: A single silo may store wheat from several farms, and flour may be ground from wheat from several different silos. It would be nearly impossible—which is to say, prohibitively expensive—totrack the sources for any given one-pound sack of flour, our friend pointed out. Merely printing the myriad shifting labels would become a complex challenge to database publishing.

Such labeling would erect huge barriers, our friend says. Any demand that we label engineered foods and not, say, naturally high-psoralen potatoes (potatos?), is but a veiled effort to stifle agricultural biotechnology: Any such requirement would lead to a *de facto* boycott—instigated not by consumers but by producers reluctant to bear the record-keeping expense.

And that, he claims, is the real objective of groups pushing for special biotechnology-derived labeling: they wish, he says, not so much to inform and protect the public as to choke agbiotech with a tourniquet of red tape.

Regulators and industrialists we ran into in The Hague during the first *Bio/Technology Europe Conference: Products, Regulators, and Politics* also seemed to find the call for voluntary labeling pitifully naïve. "No manufacturer," they agreed, "is going to take the risk of alienating the public by declaring his product to be the product of biotechnology." No one seemed troubled by the prospect of alienating the public by trying to slip something past them.

Public opinion and *realpolitik* loomed large at the meeting. The contrast seemed especially striking in the light of the FDA food policy's brilliant success in focusing on public safety and refusing to play *realpolitik* games.

Indeed, several European Community and national regulators seemed convinced that their brief extended beyond health and safety to include emotional comfort. As one regulator described his mission: "First, to protect the public against any possible risk. Second, to reassure public opinion. Third, to avoid fragmented rule-making which becomes an obstacle to business development."

We shudder at the notion of protecting people against any *possible* risk, no matter how unlikely—that is a prescription for proscription. And we quake at the idea that rules should be made to soothe people's fears, rather than to protect them.

Another regulator mentioned that his agency was undertaking social, economic, and ethical risk assessments in addition to mandated public-health and environmental evaluations. Though he hastened to add that these non-health-and-safety studies would not be used directly in the regulatory process, we were not comforted.

The object of regulations is to protect the public. This is a job we urgently want the regulators to do rigorously and well. But that should be their sole concern. Battles for the hearts and minds of the people should be waged by corporations and critics in plain political sight, not in the warrens of the rule-makers. Wider wars—over concentration of capital, corporate power, national health and agricultural policy, and sociology—should be fought out in courts, legislatures, and the press, not in license filings.

The regulators' task is hard enough—especially given the rising tide of new product introductions and the continued straitened circumstances of most regulatory agencies—without lumbering them with a job lot of "political realities" aimed more at protecting politicians' hinder parts than at protecting public health.

—**Douglas McCormick**