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A turning point in Johannesburg?

To the editor:

A great deal has been written about the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) that took place between August 26 and September 4 in Johannesburg, South Africa. In all that has been written, however, it was not widely noted that at least two developments occurred at the meeting that are of particular interest to the agricultural biotechnology community.

First, we saw a new twist in the behavior of some elements of the global protest industry. In a significant departure from what we have seen at most high-profile gatherings, some prominent naysayers openly sidestepped issues relating to human and environmental safety. One of my antagonists in a contrapuntal TV interview opened by stipulating the safety of foods and crops improved through biotechnology! He conceded that the real concern of the protest community is, rather, with economic issues. In particular, he voiced concerns over concentration in the agrifood industry, issues of farmers' freedom of choice, and the like.

It must be noted that this shift was not universal. Some of the protesters will go to their graves firmly gripped by the conviction that foods derived from crops improved through biotechnology are Satan's handiwork incarnate, slowly poisoning the land and all the humans on the planet. It is irrelevant that the history of biology since the dawn of agriculture contradicts their fears. Their minds are made up, and they will not be confused by facts. But this change in tactics is nevertheless welcome news for several reasons.

Such refreshing honesty has been all too scarce in recent years. Close watchers who have seen the activists drum up one scare story after another, only to discard them as soon as facts begin to gain a toehold, have long suspected the hand-wringing about safety was more a means to advance the underlying economic concerns than an end in itself. It is, after all, easily verified by independent and critical third-party analyses that crops and foods improved through biotechnology are subjected to more rigorous scrutiny, in advance, in depth and detail,

than any others in human history; it is also an awkward fact for the protest industry that nearly a half-billion acres of biotechnology cropland over the past decade have produced hundreds of millions of tons of food, eaten by hundreds of millions of people around the planet (yes, even in Europe) with nary a snuffle or headache as a consequence. So let us talk about economic issues, about socio-economic impacts, for we have good answers there as well.

The fact is that biotechnology in agriculture is not the cause of concentration in the agrifood industry. Wave a magic wand and remake the world so that Watson and Crick never lived, and neither Rosalind Franklin, Maurice Wilkins nor anybody else ever figured out how DNA works. In this alternative universe, we do not understand the structure or function of DNA, and the recombinant DNA-based biotechnology industry as we know it does not exist. Yet concentration in the agrifood industry would still be a dominant feature of the global economic landscape for a very simple reason: it is the result of one of the strongest and most relentless forces on the planet—consumer demand. In this case, consistent demand over millennia for more, better food, in larger quantities and at lower prices.

The issue of farmers' choice has also been raised as a reason to reject biotechnology. Activists profess moral outrage at the prospect that farmers who have, for millennia, saved a portion of their harvest to use as seed for the next season's plantings might lose that "freedom." But in throwing up access barriers to farmers who purchase a new seed variety or would use an innovation like "terminator technology" or other genetic use-restriction technology, activists would deny these farmers the freedom to choose how they would farm, the very freedom the activists profess to endorse so strongly. They make a serious mistake in trying to "protect" farmers' interests in such a paternalistic way: they assume farmers are too stupid to calculate their own self-interest. There is a reason that crops improved through biotechnology have been adopted at greater rates than we have ever before seen in agriculture: biotechnology delivers, and what it delivers to the farmer is increased choice, increased profits, and increased sustainability. It is, in fact, freedom of choice that has driven the meteoric adoption of biotechnology varieties, wherever farmers have been free to choose.

This leads on to the second major new agbiotech development at the WSSD: for the first time, we saw significant numbers of real, live, developing-world farmers who have grown crops improved through biotechnology. More than 300 came from the Philippines,

India, Kenya, Nigeria, and South Africa. They challenged the empty arguments of the self-appointed individuals who have professed to speak on their behalf. (They also presented a "Bullshit Award" to the most egregious abusers for advancing policies that perpetuate poverty and hunger.)

Chengal Reddy, leader of the Indian Farmers Federation, said, "Traditional organic farming is the very technology that led to mass starvation in India for centuries, with up to one-tenth of the population perishing in periodic famines. Mass starvation in India was finally ended by the Green Revolution. Indian farmers need access to new technologies and especially to biotechnologies. It's our choice—and our right."

Farmers from developing countries speaking for themselves is something new, something very big, and the protest industry seemed at a loss as to how to respond.

The debate has shifted ground. It is no longer about the politically paralyzing fears of the European politicians and activists that claim to represent that continent's 350 million people; it begins to be about the interests of the other 5.7-plus billion people on the planet. For these and additional reasons (such as the emergence of government-industry partnerships for development; and foolish and inhumane overreaching by activists on food aid), I think we may well look back on Johannesburg as something of a watershed event—a turning point. The day may be not too far off when the tail will cease wagging the dog.

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The views expressed are the author's alone.

Labeling should be mandatory

To the editor:

Michael Reiss's recent editorial downplaying the ethical value of labeling except in cases of extreme need (e.g., for highly allergenic foods) misses the point entirely. Labeling of a new product with a poor or untested track record for human health consequences is a moral imperative from the vantage point of public health ethics. Although it is true that the degree of risk is probably from slight to non-existent across much of the spectrum of potentially labeled products—as in the case of foods labeled as free of genetically modified organism (GMO) residue whose production in fact involves a manufacturing step with, say, a GMO-based enzyme—this low likelihood of risk does not exempt the manufacturer or purveyor from the duty to