Frankenstein food beats starvation

Anna Lavelle | *December 06, 2007*

AS we eat our chips, hamburgers and milkshakes for lunch today, let's put the debate about genetically modified food into perspective. We eat food laden in fats and preservatives largely without debate or complaint. Yet the prospect of producing GM foods that could be drought resistant, grown without being heavily treated with pesticide and made more nutritious has caused a huge outcry.

Until the NSW and Victorian governments lifted the GM crop moratorium last week, Queensland was the only state able to grow GM canola, even though the crop has been grown extensively in Canada, the US, Argentina and more than 20 other countries. Now we will have GM canola being grown along the entire eastern seaboard and, despite what the nay-sayers may argue, the sky will not fall in.

Critics argue that the technology has yet to be shown to be harmless. This counters the recommendations from not only Victoria's Chief Scientist Gustav Nossal that GM foods are safe but also from organisations such as Britain's influential Nuffield Council on Bioethics, which argues that the technology has the potential to increase crop yields and improve the livelihoods of poor people.

It is simply not scientific to argue that all GM food represents a hazard to humans. Surely the hazard depends on the nature of the dangerous characteristic, not how the crop gained that characteristic. For example, the US Department of Agriculture found that a variety of potato obtained through conventional breeding was very toxic and so it was never developed as a food. However, a potato developed through genetic modification at about the same time did not contain the toxin and was apparently safe to eat.

Instead of seeing GM crops as tainted food, why not look at them as alternatives to the dangerous foods and crops that form the basis of products on our shelves? Surely a food grown with less pesticide would have to be less dangerous than crops drenched in chemicals? And with fruit and vegetable prices rising skywards as the drought worsens, wouldn't it be better (for farmers and consumers) to be able to develop crops that are genetically developed to be drought-resistant?

Then there is the argument that while we in the West have the luxury of opting for organic tomatoes and GM-free margarine, there are many people who don't have access to sufficient food at all, GM or otherwise. Globally, more than 800 million people, 300 million of whom are children, go to bed hungry every day. Of these children, more than 90per cent are suffering from long-term malnourishment and micronutrient deficiency. In these countries, genetically modified crops could be fortified with nutrients to overcome deficiencies or to increase crop yield by protecting crops against pests. There is also the cost issue of paying for pesticides and herbicides as against other family needs.

In developing countries, pests can wipe out a crop, leaving a family or village with little food until the next planting season. These are people who do not care whether the West labels a food Frankenstein. They want food, preferably food they can grow themselves.

Surely our time and effort could be better spent debating issues that offer real threats: the rise of famine; the effect of drought on food prices; the need for alternative fuels; the contribution of fatty and low nutritional foods to the obesity problem. Oh, that's right, there is an answer to all these problems: GM foods. All the other debates about waiting until GM foods have been proven safe are spurious. GM foods are safe and they have been used for decades without consequence. If you want an organic tomato, you have the choice to buy one and that choice should remain. Let the rest of the world have the option to simply eat.

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http://www.theaustralian.news.com.au/story/0,25197,22876234-7583,00.html, 23/08/08

drought – a long period when there is little or no rain **nutritious –** contains many of the substances needed for life and growth **NSW –** New South Wales (in the south-east of Australia) **Victoria** – south of NSW **moratorium –** a stopping of an activity for an agreed amount of time **Queensland –** in the north-east of Australia **canola –** (dt.) Raps (to) **counter -** (to) react to (sth.) with an opposing opinion or action **crop yield –** the amount of crops produced **livelihood –** the money people need to pay for food, a place to live, clothing etc. **hazard –** sth. dangerous and likely to cause damage **tainted –** damaged (to) **opt –** (to) make a choice, esp. for one thing or possibility in preference to any others **malnourished –** weak and in bad health because of a lack of food or because of a lack of the types of food necessary for good health **micronutrient –** (dt.) Spurenelement **fortified –** strengthened **obesity –** (dt.) Fettleibigkeit **spurious -** false and not what it appears to be, or based on sth. that has not been correctly understood and therefore false