



Marketing of modified crops vital

BY ART HOVEY / Lincoln Journal Star

The wheat harvest is almost over in Nebraska. The debate over genetically modified wheat isn't.

Earlier misgivings about manipulating the genes of corn to boost insect resistance, for example, or soybeans to provide herbicide resistance are magnified with wheat, because a much larger portion of it is grown for direct human consumption.

Despite signs of uneasiness among consumers in Japan, Europe and elsewhere, the University of Nebraska-Lincoln has been on the cutting edge of wheat biotechnology work for several years.

But wheat breeder Steve Baenziger doesn't expect UNL efforts aimed at improving disease resistance and drought tolerance to reach the marketplace until somebody produces something else: research results that are of direct benefit to consumers.

"I think what we're going to have to have is a product that people seriously want," he said.

Pat Nelson of Upland, who raised about 400 acres of conventional wheat this year with husband Dave, brought back a light-hearted suggestion from a recent national meeting of wheat promoters in Boise, Idaho.

"A guy from Korea said, if we could get Viagra wheat or something like that, something that would be of benefit to the consumer, we'd have an easier way of selling it," Nelson said.

Mary Schluckebier of Seward offers a more serious perspective.

Schluckebier, national executive director of the Celiac-Sprue Association/USA, pointed to a hereditary disease, an international membership of 10,000 and a common and often severe immune reaction among celiac sufferers to the protein in wheat flour.

If the building blocks of the protein could be manipulated with biotechnology, "it means it would not evoke an immune reaction," Schluckebier said.

And if that could be done in a greenhouse setting -- or some other controlled environment where there was no risk of genetically modified wheat crossbreeding with conventional wheat -- it could be a big money-maker for the wheat sector.

"If you could grade them, under the wheat industry, in such a way that you could guarantee a pharmaceutical grade, it would be a wonderful niche market," she said.

Up to now, the debate over genetically modified crops has pitted U.S. farmers and St.

Louis-based ag business giant Monsanto against environmental and consumer groups worried about the tainting of the food supply with so-called "Frankenfoods."

"The traits we have put in corn and soybeans have been more production traits," UNL's Baenziger said.

There are "tremendous potentials" in consumer-oriented biotechnology. "At the same time, when half the crop is exported, you better make sure the customer is willing to buy it."

The time has not arrived yet.

In fact, the Canadian Wheat Board is pressuring Monsanto to withdraw its application to produce and sell genetically modified wheat seed there.

Nelson, a member of the Nebraska Wheat Board, expects discussion of policy on that same issue next month in Scottsbluff. She does not expect a policy change.

"The Wheat Board is excited about looking into the potential of genetically modified wheat," she said. "However, we don't want anything released here in the U.S. until overseas (customers) accept it."

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