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USDA’s 150th Birthday: A Teachable Moment

By

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Milk is pasteurized, homogenized and has vitamins A and D added. Bread is enriched by adding Vitamin B. Water has fluoride added. No one gives it a second thought. Indeed, if the milk did not have the added vitamins, consumers would feel cheated.

So, why are those same consumers concerned about seeds bred to resist disease or modified to increase yields? It does not make sense. But maybe we are going about it wrong.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture celebrates its 150th birthday on May 15th, and Secretary Vilsack is planning an appropriate celebration. In July, we will celebrate the 150th birthday of the land grant college system. These events and the focus on global food security at the G 8 on May 19th can become teachable moments if we are united in that goal and can find the correct messaging.

By 2050, the world’s population will increase by another 2 billion people. Agriculture production will have to double to keep pace. According to some projections, more food will need to be produced in the next 50 years than has been produced during the past 10,000 years combined.

Dr. Rajiv Shah, the Administrator of USAID had an interesting quote in his 2012 Annual Letter: “To put it simply, if you care about fighting poverty, then you should care about boosting harvests.” In short, the increased yields can’t be accomplished without the full use of science, innovative technology and biotechnology – but that requires public acceptance.

The recent United Nations’ report on Global Sustainability entitled Resilient People, Resilient Planet provides an important path forward in that regard. It coins a new term, “green biotechnologies”. The report, released by an international blue-ribbon panel, calls for a new type of Green Revolution, one that is less dependent on fossil fuels and uses less water, noting that agriculture accounts for 70 percent of the world’s freshwater use.
The UN Report says that: “New ‘green’ biotechnologies can play a valuable role in enabling farmers to adapt to climate change, improve resistance to pests, restore soil fertility and contribute to the diversification of the rural economy.”

In truth, green biotechnology is exactly what many agricultural producers use in the United States, except we do a terrible job of explaining it.

Secretary of State Hillary Clinton has fully embraced biotechnology for agriculture but does not generally use the word “biotechnology.” Instead, the Secretary refers to specific traits. For example, when announcing the World Food Prize in 2009, she commended Dr. Gebisa Ejeta of Ethiopia for developing new sorghum seeds “which needed less water and actually yielded more grain.” The Secretary then discussed how Dr. Ejeta created “a system to train farmers in crop management and help them purchase seeds and fertilizers on a regular basis” and called for training the “next generation of seed scientists.”

Perhaps we need to go school on the messaging being used by Secretary Clinton. The science is strong but maybe we need different terminology. “Genetic modification” sounds scary. It can mean anything. Adding a trait, however, to reduce the use of pesticides is something the consumer can understand and accept. Remember the milk example.

“Green” biotechnology’s positive impact on the environment and the sustainability of the planet must be addressed first before the consumer is going to care about the secondary benefits of biotechnology. At that point, and only at that point, will the consumer be open to the other benefits of agricultural innovation:

- Those of you reading this article all know that consumers spend less than 10% of their disposable income on food. It is the lowest in the history of the world. It is this low cost of food that provides the disposable income we need for iPads, flat screens and other “essentials.”
- Advances in science are critical to feeding the planet.
- Eliminating hunger leads to economic advances and political stability.

Former Israeli President Shimon Peres has pointed out that “In twenty five years, Israel increased its agriculture yields seventeen times. This is amazing.” he noted, while adding that agriculture is “ninety-five percent science.” Australian scientists have just tested a new strain of wheat that could increase yields in saline soils by 25 percent. If that works, in a sense, we will expand the land mass of the planet.

It will take more than one day to impact public opinion, but May 15th is a good day to start. What if, in addition to recognizing USDA and thanking our farmers and ranchers for their contribution to America, all stakeholders in the food chain joined together to speak out on May 15th and address:

- How scientific advances in agriculture production benefit global sustainability and the environment,
In order to feed a hungry planet, we will need all of agriculture – from the small farms that feed a community to the large farms that feed the world.

What if the Administration, our friends on the Hill, the Deans of our great agriculture colleges, scientists, Bill Gates and the Clinton Foundation all spoke out on May 15th to applaud agriculture but also explain Farming 101? It might just make a difference. Let’s try.

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