LETTERS TO THE EDITOR


Dear Editor:

I would like to comment concerning the Biotechnology Forum that was published in the July–August 2000 issue of Agronomy Journal. I am troubled by a bias that I noticed in the Forum articles. In these articles, most of the statements critical of genetically engineered crops, commonly called GMOs, were referenced to activist entities such as Greenpeace or Jeremy Rifkin. Statements supportive of GMOs were referenced to scientists. Works by scientists critical of GMOs were not used as references, or were mentioned and then dismissed. Thus, the Forum articles gave the appearance of framing the debate in terms of scientists vs. activists, or science vs. emotion.

The third article in the Forum series, “Corporate Control of Biotechnology” (Jordan, 2000), cited three references by “Anonymous.” If a citation includes the name of a real person who has published other works, you can check on their credentials and determine whether you think they are trustworthy. “Anonymous” citations are unhelpful in that regard. Citing “Anonymous” also does not make people aware that there are serious arguments on both sides of the issue of corporate control. Criticism of corporate control is put forth in “Consolidation in the Food and Agriculture System,” by Dr. William Heffernan, rural sociologist at the University of Missouri (Heffernan et al., 1999). The “Corporate Control of Biotechnology” article also discussed, with an “Anonymous” reference, the emotional issues surrounding free trade and globalization.

A better reference could be “Rethinking the Economics of Self-Interests,” by Dr. John Ikerd, Professor Emeritus of agricultural economics at the University of Missouri (Ikerd, 1999).

The second article, “Genetically Modified Crops and the Environment” (Barton and Dracup, 2000), included citations of Greenpeace and the Natural Law Party. These are actually very similar to “Anonymous”; it is just a different way of wording the citation. There is no name of an author whose credentials you could check. A reader of this article might assume that no scientists have published criticisms of the environmental impact of GM crops. That assumption would be incorrect. Some examples of relevant works by scientists include “Why is AgBiotech Not Ready for Prime Time,” by Dr. E. Ann Clark (Clark, 2000a); or a summary of the International Workshop on the Ecological Impacts of Transgenic Crops (Altieri, 2000).

Also in the second article, a reference was given (Hodgson, 1999) for criticism of the research by Dr. Losey and colleagues that indicated harm to monarch butterflies from GM corn pollen (Losey et al., 1999). No reference was given for criticism of the refuge concept that is relied upon to manage insect resistance genes.

Modified Crops” (Kaeppler, 2000), did not cite “Anonymous” or activist groups as references, but neither did it with criticisms of the safety of GM foods. Dr. M.A. Barton, for example, has co-written several articles about food safety issues arising from use of the cauliflower viral promoter in gene constructs (Ho et al., 2000). The Safety article mentioned the intense criticism of Arpad Pusztai, which involved possible damage to genetically modified potatoes (Ewen and Pusztai, 1999). The article did not, however, mention that there were defenders of Dr. Pusztai’s work (Ho et al., 2000; Clark, 2000b).

My intent with this letter is not to denigrate the Forum articles, but rather to call attention to what I see as a systemic problem of lack of sufficient, forthright debate surrounding biotechnology. I think that Agronomy Journal, the Tri-Societies can do better. Please consider giving Forum space to some of the critics of biotechnology. Thank you.

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References


