

Wishing for a calamity

It's been 10 years since genetically modified foods came to Canada, and environmental groups are furious no one's died yet

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Most citizens in North America, while munching down their daily bread, are blissfully unaware of a significant anniversary that some of their food has reached. It has now been 10 years since the introduction of genetically modified food products into the North American diet.

The anniversary has gone unnoticed in the mainstream press because there is nothing sensational to report; in all those years, not a single person has gotten sick or died from eating any food that contains a genetically modified organism (GM). In this case, no news is good news, but this positive situation has driven environmental and consumer groups to exasperation. They desperately need dead bodies or sick people to justify their mindless campaign against genetically modified foods.

So they have, instead, had to resort to junk science and precautionary-principle fear-mongering in a desperate attempt to keep the anti-GMO issue alive in North America. The public remains unmoved and common sense has prevailed, largely by default, as few consumers have any clue what genetically modified food means, or that they've been eating it for the past 10 years. Anti-GMO forces try to justify their position by quoting surveys that the majority of consumers are against GM food. Those same consumers, if asked, would probably be against the artificial heat shock treatment of dairy products (otherwise known as pasteurization). Pollsters can get the answer they want from a naïve responder who doesn't want to appear ignorant.

If bogus surveys work, then environmental groups will use as much junk science as it takes to deceive the public. With enough money and the overbroad interpretations of scientific evidence, they can manufacture doubt out of almost anything.

Take the experiment, cited repeatedly by anti-GMO groups as proof positive that GM food products are deadly, in which mice died from eating a genetically modified potato. What the groups fail to mention is that mice would die eating a non-GM potato. Potatoes contain too much moisture, too much starch and too little protein for a small rodent to survive on.

Nevertheless, the anti-GMO forces have managed to succeed in Europe. Consumers there have accepted the notion that there must be something wrong with GM food products, despite the fact that there is not a shred of evidence to justify their fear. Environmental groups were able to link government failure to rapidly address outbreaks of BSE and foot-and-mouth disease in recent years with the GMO issue. The message to consumers has been that if officials aren't capable of telling the truth about those two food safety calamities, how can they be trusted on the GM food issue?

European governments, spooked by a possible voter backlash over the GMO issue, have derailed any potential political consequences by dithering on decisions. They agree that science and the North American experience prove GM foods are safe, but will not allow widespread importation of GM food products or plant genetics pending further study. It's the perfect political cop-out: yes, but no.

A recent visit to Europe by your humble columnist has found that another matter has crept into the GMO issue that will delay a common sense resolution: marketing. Some European countries, and Switzerland in particular,

Not a single person has died from eating GM foods... environmental and consumer groups are exasperated by this.

have been promoting their food exports by advertising they come from a GMO-free country. The governments do acknowledge that science backs up the safety of GM food products, but all is fair in promotion and business competition – including using GMO scare tactics

to their advantage. This marketing development will have some effect on any decision by European governments about opening the door to genetically modified produce, political science being a well-practised art when it comes to food issues in Europe.

The way the Europeans have used GM as a marketing tool would be something for North American food producers to fear – which is why they oppose any GM food product labeling on this side of the ocean. But that fear may no longer matter. The past 10 years have shown consumers are unmoved by the issue; no dead bodies in the street from genetically modified food poisoning so no need for concern. Let's hope that a common sense perspective continues to rule the day.