

15 October 2007

To the editors, Western Producer;

Your editorial “Ag has obligations to explore options” (11 Oct) unfortunately falls for the perennial promises of the biotech industry, promises that have been repeated ad nauseam since Canada first launched its national biotechnology strategy in 1981. The ills of the world are pressing indeed. But it would be wise to question the offering of a technological fix as a ‘solution’ to climate change, peak oil, or malnutrition.

You make bold claims, but it is hard to see how biotechnology is going to contribute to carbon sequestration or environmentally-sound agrofuel production through genetic engineering of crops. There is already scientific evidence that transgenic canola processed into bio-diesel is harder on the environment than regular diesel fuel* and the promise of carbon sequestration would appear to be little more than a sales campaign. The only ethanol that appears to be viably produced without massive subsidies is from sugar cane in a geography like that of Brazil, but there its production is dependent on virtual slave labour and is accompanied by the destruction of small farms and the Rainforest. Cellulosic agrofuels are years, if not decades, away from actual production, regardless of their promoters hype.

While there have been promises and more promises for improved nutrition through genetic engineering, it is now evident that the industrial production of food crops, GE or not, has led to diminishing nutritional value.** As for feeding the hungry, it is obvious that biotechnology is not the answer. There is enough food produced today to feed everyone. The problem is political and economic, a matter of equitable distribution.***

You suggest that “drought and saline resistant crop varieties could free up water for other uses.” You do not elaborate. What water are saline resistant crops going to free up? The genetic engineering of drought resistance is being heralded as making it possible to grow crops with little or no water, not to “free up” non-existent water.

You cite the figures published by International Service for the Acquisition of Agri-biotechnology Application (ISAAA) which was established years ago as a lobby for the biotech industry and has never deviated from that function. The ISAAA figures are intended to be “staggering” – that is the job of propaganda – but they are equally misleading. Resistance to genetic engineering is increasing, and the biotech pushers know that. Resistance to the insidious government-backed (USAID in particular) GE-colonization of Africa is growing rapidly, particularly in West Africa. Resistance to GE is also growing in India. The advance of GE soy production in Argentina, Brazil and Paraguay is due, not to the eagerness of farmers to plant it, but to the ruthless expansion of massive industrial production and the virtual elimination of small farmers who actually grow food for people, including their own families and communities, not animal and automobile feed.

You ask, “Does agriculture owe it to the world and to future generations to explore responsible use of biotechnology?” Yes indeed. But aggressive promotion of biotechnology, the refusal to label GE foods, the incessant promises of ‘benefits’ that continually recede over the horizon is not responsible. It is irresponsible, as is your editorial. Both farmers and the public deserve better.

*‘Nobel chemist finds corn farming methods can hurt the Earth more than burning gasoline,’ Reuters, 28/9/07; ‘Is the party over?’, editorial Manitoba Cooperator, 4/10/07

**see “Still No Free Lunch: nutrient levels in U.S. food supply eroded by pursuit of high yields,” by Brian Halweil for The Organic Centre, www.organic-center.org/science.latest.php?action=view&report_id=115

*** “Shattering Myths: Can sustainable agriculture feed the world?”, Institute for Food and Development Studies, Fall, 2007 <<http://www.foodfirst.org/node/1778>>

(signed)

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