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World Food Prize laureates say biotechnology helps feed the world

Megan Fincher | Oct. 22, 2013 Eco Catholic
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The question of how to feed an estimated 9 billion people by 2050 drew more than 1,000 experts from around the world here last week, and the prevailing answers revolved around biotechnology, genetically modified organisms (GMOs) and agribusiness.

The annual World Food Prize conference, held Oct. 16 to 18, included panels, speeches and question-and-answer sessions with scientists, politicians, and religious and business leaders from 65 countries. On Oct. 17, the World Food Prize was awarded to three biotechnology scientists in a ceremony at the Iowa State Capitol.

Sharing the award were Robert Fraley, the executive vice president of Monsanto, the world's largest producer of GMOs; Mary-Dell Chilton, the founder of the world's third-largest GMO company, Syngenta Biotechnology; and Marc Van Montagu, founder of two biotechnology companies and a nonprofit that promotes biotechnology in developing countries.

The World Food Prize laureates all have scientific and financial interests in their field of study. The decision to give the award to people engaged in biotechnology was controversial, as many countries have banned GMOs or at least require labeling of GMO products until further studies dispel any questions of health risks.

At a press conference the day before the World Food Prize ceremony, the three defended their work and said biotechnology will help feed the world's growing population because it can lead to high crop yields and stronger pest control.

NCR asked the laureates if farmers would be allowed to save genetically modified seeds, at least until they make enough money to buy the seeds yearly, as companies such as Monsanto require.

"Small farmers in places like China and India are the vast majority of [Monsanto's] customers," Fraley said. "They have a choice to buy biotech seeds. They choose to buy because biotech seeds create incremental value.

"When we launched biotech cotton in India, they doubled their yields in cotton. Think about what it means at the village level to provide such great incremental value," Fraley said.

The laureates also dismissed questions about the health risks of genetically modified foods.

"There is no truth regarding the safety of GMOs," Fraley said. "The track record is absolutely impeccable."

The laureates compared genetically modified foods with hybrid crops like wheat that people have been consuming for generations. They said countries such as France that have banned genetically modified foods were setting a poor example for countries like Kenya, which has followed France's lead.

"The reason this technologically has been adopted by farmers is because it works," Fraley said. "The idea that someone is going to buy products that don't work is sheer nuts."

Many countries that do not ban genetically modified foods require clear GMO labeling. This rule was adopted by the European Union, for example, but not by the United States.

Fraley said there is no reason to start labeling genetically modified foods in the United States because they have been sold to the public since 1994. "Monsanto is absolutely in favor of voluntary labeling" but not mandatory labeling, he said.

"This science has so much potential. Are we going to limit it by policy and regulation?" Fraley asked. He said he believes genetically modified crops are helping reduce hunger in poor countries, and he said he fears a labeling requirement in the U.S. would alarm other countries.

"I think it would be the death of the technology if there was an obligatory label," Chilton added.

Fraley agreed: "This is the safest food ever produced by man," he said.

Note: For Cardinal Turkson's visit with Occupy the World Food Prize, an anti-GMO group in Des Moines, see here [1] and here [2].

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