



Biotechnology from Farm to Market

AFBF Issues Backgrounder

Biotechnology—the application of recombinant DNA science to engineer specific traits in plant varieties—is an important tool for farmers to improve yield and profitability by reducing the use of costly inputs, improving weed management, and reducing tillage for better soil, water and air quality. Today, roughly 90 percent of corn, cotton and soybeans grown in the U.S. have been improved through biotechnology, and farmers are choosing biotech traits when growing other crops such as alfalfa, sugar beets and canola.

Despite rapid adoption by farmers and a strong scientific consensus that biotechnology does not pose health and environmental risks, regulatory burdens are slowing research and innovation of new biotech traits and are starting to reduce U.S. farmers' international competitive advantage. In addition, activist groups have repeatedly threatened new traits by blocking science-based regulatory decisions, filing spurious lawsuits and advocating for labeling mandates.

Defending an Efficient, Science-Based Regulatory Process: Since 1986, the Coordinated Framework for Regulation of Biotechnology has successfully governed how the Department of Agriculture (USDA), the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) work together to regulate new biotech products. In recent years, however, the process has become unpredictable and the timeline for reviewing new products has increased dramatically due to overlapping regulatory responsibilities, a lack of inter-agency coordination, the looming threat of activist lawsuits that drain agency resources, and efforts to introduce socioeconomic criteria into regulatory decisions.

Improving Coexistence and Protecting Property Rights – Coexistence refers to the concurrent use of diverse cropping methods, including organic, conventional and modern biotechnology. Coexistence is most effective when it facilitates farmers' ability to choose a particular cropping method, along with the associated responsibilities and production practices needed to maintain crop integrity, without conflicting with property rights of other farmers. Efforts to educate farmers about effective stewardship and good neighborly communication can help to strengthen coexistence. However, some groups have advocated for establishing heavy-handed coexistence policies that would impose costly requirements for farmers of biotech crops, such as mandatory stewardship practices and the creation of indemnity funds to compensate non-biotech farmers for the unintended presence of biotech material. These policy proposals contradict the traditional principles of value-added and identity-preserved agriculture, and go beyond what is justified by science to regulate the use of biotechnology and influence markets based on commercial concerns.

Opposing Mandatory Labeling – FDA’s longstanding policy on biotech food labeling states: “FDA has no basis for concluding that bioengineered foods differ from other foods in any meaningful or uniform way, or that, as a class, foods developed by the new techniques present any or greater safety concern than foods developed by traditional plant breeding.” The world’s top credible scientific authorities—including the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization, the World Health Organization, the National Research Council of the National Academies of Sciences, the American Medical Association and the American Dietetic Association—have all concluded that foods with biotech-derived ingredients pose no more risk than any other food. Still, there have been significant efforts to require labeling of foods with biotech ingredients, regardless of scientific evidence.

Promoting International Standards – Improving global market access and reducing trade disruptions can have enormous economic benefits for U.S. agricultural exports. Reducing asynchrony in the scientific standards, timeline and data requirements that different countries use to regulate products can improve market access.

Federal Legislative Status

On July 29, 2016 the president signed S. 764, the National Bioengineered Food Disclosure Standard, into law. While not perfect, S. 764 was a compromise that Farm Bureau endorsed. The law creates a uniform standard for the disclosure of ingredients derived from bioengineering and allows food companies to provide that information through an on-package statement, symbol or electronic disclosure. It also created a strong federal preemption provision to protect interstate commerce and prevent state-by-state labeling laws and was effective on the date of enactment. USDA has two years to develop the disclosure standards and Farm Bureau has been an active participant in the rulemaking process.

AFBF Policy

Farm Bureau acknowledges that U.S. agriculture’s competitive advantage in world markets will be maintained only by the continued support for technology and seeks to preserve opportunities for future biotech products.

Farm Bureau supports science-based regulation of biotech crops and opposes the use of socioeconomic criteria when approving and controlling their use. To improve regulation of biotechnology, Farm Bureau supports:

- USDA leading evaluations and approvals to move products to the marketplace in a timely manner;
- Agencies continuing to serve their respective roles in providing unbiased, scientifically-based evaluations;
- Agencies evaluating the regulatory approval process for possible improvements; and
- Initiatives to assist the research, development and regulatory review of biotech and specialty crops.

Farm Bureau encourages efforts to educate farmers to be good stewards of biotech crops to preserve access and marketability. Farm Bureau opposes the adoption of coexistence policies that tax or penalize growers for choosing to use approved biotech traits.

Farm Bureau believes agricultural products produced using approved biotechnology should not be required to designate individual inputs or technologies on the product label. Farm Bureau supports existing FDA labeling policies and opposes state policies on biotech labeling, identification, use and availability.

Farm Bureau supports active involvement and leadership by the U.S. government in the development of international standards for biotechnology, including harmonization of regulatory standards, testing and LLP policies.

Farm Bureau supports the use of gene editing in livestock and crops and the use of sound science in the regulation of genetically edited products. We believe that consumers, both domestic and foreign, deserve sound-science-based education on genomic editing.

Discussion Questions

1. How many of your council members have and/or are planning to use seeds incorporating biotech traits in their operations? What reasons – economic or environmental – do they feel are a benefit to their operations? If they do not use these seed sources, what questions or concerns do they have with biotechnology?
2. Sound science or consumer preference? Which train of thought should have the ultimate say in crafting food production policy? Is there room for both viewpoints? How could policymakers strike a “balance” between these positions?
3. Should foods incorporating ingredients sourced from biotech resources be labeled as such? Should consumers be expected to pay a different price for products that do not incorporate biotech resources?
4. Who should have jurisdictional authority when it comes to labeling and marketing consumer products containing biotech resources, the federal or state government?