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A blog about cultivating stories from the ground up

AUG. 07, 2012

Seeking answers on GMO questions

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By: Camille Phillips

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"I'm not producing any food that I wouldn't eat myself," said Nathan Dorn. He's frustrated that a negative perception of genetically modified food reflects poorly on farmers. (Camille Phillips/Harvest Public Media)

Last week I took a trip up to the University of Nebraska-Lincoln to talk to scientist Rick Goodman about his research on the risks of allergens in genetically modified crops. Goodman is a former employee of Monsanto, one of the major providers of genetically modified seeds.

In the midst of complex explanations about the allergenicity of proteins, two

of Goodman's comments stood out: people should rely on the weight of evidence; and in the end, it's a matter of belief.

When it comes to genetically modified crops, however, it's more about relying on the scientist than the evidence. The average consumer doesn't have the knowledge base to accurately interpret scientific studies.

My high school forays into biology, for example, leave me able to follow a basic scientific explanation, but my knowledge is too limited to be able to judge for myself how sound the science is. So I have to rely on the scientists to explain their research.

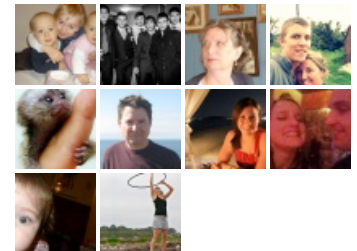
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According to Goodman, the weight of evidence shows that the genetically modified crops currently on the market are safe for consumption. But according to Jeffrey Smith, author of *Genetic Roulette*, scientists funded by biotech companies avoid undertaking studies that might show negative results.

Smith says preliminary studies done in other parts of the world by independent scientists have raised worrisome questions. For example, that the promoter switch attached to the inserted gene may permanently turn on naturally occurring genes around it in addition to the inserted gene, and as a result produce unintended allergens and toxins.

Smith's background is in business, not science, but he has become the definitive voice against genetically modified food in the United States. "I am not a scientist," he told me, "but for the last 16 years I have been interviewing scientists and translating what they say into English so that everyone could understand."

So who does the consumer believe? For that matter, who does the farmer trust?

Like the majority of corn and soybean farmers in the country today, Nathan Dorn from Firth, Neb. grows genetically modified crops. Dorn and other farmers rely on the biotech companies to give them safe seeds. Talk in the media against genetically modified organisms (GMOs) makes Dorn feel misunderstood.

"I'm not producing any food that I wouldn't eat myself," he said. "I don't expect you to eat anything that I wouldn't put on my table or that I wouldn't feed to my family."

When it comes to GMOs, farmers and consumers are in it together. They both are dependent on the information coming to them from advocates and scientists, biotech companies and government agencies. And the more voices added to the mix, the more perspectives there are to sift through.

As far as the biotech companies and government agencies in the United States are concerned, the matter is closed. The research has been done, and the products on the market have been approved for sale. But for others, the conclusions aren't so clear. And in the end, as Goodman said, it all comes down to belief.

What do you think? Are genetically modified crops to blame for the increase in food allergies? [Share your thoughts on the Harvest Network.](#)

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