

It all comes down to belief

By Camille Phillips

Last week I took a trip up to the University of Nebraska-Lincoln to talk to food safety 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 to me. This is fine when all the scientists agree, but in this case they don't.

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. He references preliminary studies from other parts of the world as more independent and definitive.

Smith's background is in business, not science, but he has become the definitive voice against genetically modified food in the United States. "I've been talking to scientists and translating their work to common English for 16 years," he said.

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

Nathan Dorn, a farmer from Firth, Neb. is among the 80 percent of corn and soybean farmers in the country who grows genetically modified crops. These farmers are relying on the biotech companies to give them safe seeds. Talk in the media against GMOs (genetically modified organisms) makes Dorn feel misunderstood.

"My family eats the same food I grow," Dorn told me. To him, if he believes the food is safe for his family to eat, then consumers should trust that it is safe as well.

People most easily believe what they can see and hear, touch and understand. But an issue as technical as the safety of genetically modified food is not easily understood.

WBut when it comes to GMOs, it's not really the farmers and consumers are in it together. As long as government agencies approve the sale of genetically modified seeds and biotech companies Farmers grow genetically modified crops because it helps them have greater yields and thus more profit. With their livelihood on the line, they have decided to trust the biotech companies who have developed the

science and the government agencies that have approved them for commercial use. -need to trust. It's the companies that provide the farmers with the seeds, the scientists who say the seeds are safe, and the government agencies who have approved them.

Consumers have power by deciding what they buy. But only among the options presented to them.

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 are concerned, the matter is closed.

The research has been done, the products currently on the market have been approved for sale. But for others the conclusions aren't so clear.