

Biotech gimmicks for free trade

by Marcia Merry

Over the summer, media stories and self-styled research reports have been put forth proclaiming that the "biotechnology revolution" for food and agriculture is at hand. The heftiest document so far is a 450-page tome released Aug. 13 by the Congressional Office of Technology Assessment (OTA). The study, entitled "A New Technological Era for American Agriculture," was commissioned last year by the Senate and House Agriculture committees, and by the House Government Operations Committee.

In the same vein, the World Bank issued a report earlier this summer entitled "Agriculture Biotechnology: The Next Green Revolution." And the general media, from food columns to farm news, are now featuring stories about what "biotechnology" can do for you down on the farm.

But is it advanced science? Is it sound economics? Is it good for you? Hardly. Even if you know little else, you should be suspicious if you know that it is something the World Bank and those on Capitol Hill support. Look at the proposals in the OTA report, and see how they measure up.

The gist of the OTA recommendations is that biotechnology, as they define it to mean genetic engineering of plant life and livestock, should be pursued by a select network of preferred private interests, in order to achieve special traits that will produce "wonder foods" useful in a far-flung food chain of the new era of "free trade."

The OTA study has five major sections: 1) Advancing Technologies; 2) Implications for Agricultural Production; 3) Environmental Quality; 4) Food Safety; and 5) Institutions.

The "advancing technologies" identified turn out to be genetic engineering for desired traits in plant life, and R&D for such animal husbandry techniques as growth hormones and cloning, in order to get food items with the characteristics wanted in a food chain increasingly dominated by a select few food companies in the world food cartel. The second "technology" reviewed is computerized farm management, to replace family farms with vast "factory farms."

Cartel companies have been positioning themselves for this new "biotech" era. For example, Cargill, a large grain dealer, plans to expand into the intercontinental fresh fruit and vegetable business by purchasing Richland Sales Co., a California fruit company that packs and ships peaches, plums, nectarines, pears, kiwi fruit, and grapes from California, and seasonal fruits from the South.

The salad bar that never dies . . .

The plant life traits sought include characteristics such as delayed rot in tomatoes and other soft produce, prolonged crispness in celery, and similar attributes for other fresh foods. The economic value of these traits is that in the emerging low-input, low-wage world of "free trade," such as the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), the cartel that dominates food trade wants fruits and vegetables that can be grown in faraway places, and cross-hauled for thousands of miles, and served up somewhere else as "fresh" or "just-picked."

In the meantime, thousands of once-prosperous local family farms that once provided picked-the-same-day seasonal produce in every nation, are to be wiped out. Under NAFTA, even the highly productive specialty crop regions of California and Florida are slated to be eliminated in favor of cheap-labor Mexican production, according to the master schemes.

There is great merit to the laboratory research and development of genetic engineering techniques, by means of which selected traits can be achieved. Scientists have succeeded in inserting desired genes into special plant cultivars, transferring traits that are inheritable generation to generation. However, the focus of the research is not toward the frontiers of scientific agriculture that will advance national well-being, but toward a future of food control and impoverishment. This becomes clear in the context of the other recommendations of the OTA report.

This author asked the OTA panelists who released the study at a press conference on Capitol Hill, why there is nothing in the book about hydroponics, photosynthesis, and other traditional agricultural pursuits based on increasing inputs per unit area and increasing yields. The spokesman replied that hydroponics and related technologies proved to be "too costly" and non-economical 10 years ago, and they are no longer relevant.

In the "implications" section of the study, the book states outright that family farms are to disappear in favor of factory-type, large-scale units. "The emergence of biotechnology and computer technologies will most likely spur on the decline of many small farms and agriculturally dependent rural communities." For example, it predicts that in the case of using bovine growth hormone, "production-marketing links via contracting and other forms of vertical integration can be expected."

The rationalization for all this Brave New World of agricultural biotech? OTA director John H. Gibbons states in the foreword: "To bolster U.S. competitiveness." The only problem, conceded by the study group, which involved 150 people, is that the public may balk. The OTA recommends that a public education campaign be waged, and that the research capacities of the top 12 land grant universities be re-focused entirely for this new era of biotechnology and competitiveness.