

WHAT'S FOR DINNER?

By Jim Hightower

"Have you heard of the "Butterfly Effect?" Both a scientific concept and an ecological reality, its essence is that the flapping of a million butterfly wings in central Mexico can have consequences in New York City, Rome, or Hong Kong. The notion is that our physical world is more intricately balanced than we know. Seemingly inconsequential acts in even the remotest area are connected to results far away in both time and space.

OK, let me step down from the professional pose and put this in terms I understand: We human geniuses don't know what the %#\$! we're doing. Corporations spew tons of nasty chemicals called organochlorines into our air and water and suddenly male alligators in Florida are born without penises (you did know they had penises, didn't you?) Detroit loads up its auto air conditioners with CFCs and-Lo!-there's a big hole in the earth's ozone layer. At issue here are industrial practices that amount to peeling a grape with an ax-the ax does get the peel off, but it makes a horrible mess of the pulp.

In the past couple of decades, such brutish industrial practices have increasingly been applied to the very genetic make-up of our food supply-and now the Butterfly Effect is beginning to affect butterflies . . . not to mention you and me. The ax wielders are biotechnology giants that are determined to outsmart Mother Nature by manipulating the DNA structure within the cells of plants. They'll take a gene from a fish and put it in a tomato, a gene from a mouse and put it in corn cells, a gene from a peanut and put it in potatoes. The combinations are limitless-Here a gene, there a gene / everywhere a gene, gene / Old McDonald had a lab / E-I-E-I-O." The results are variously known as GA (genetically-altered food), GMO (genetically modified organisms), GM (genetically-manipulated), GE (genetically engineered) . . . or, more rudely, Frankenfood.

In the forefront of this Brave New Food World are the big four global giants who refer to themselves with a straight face as "life science" corporations: Monsanto, Novartis, DuPont, and Hoescht. Their intention is no less arrogant than to re-make the world's food supply, all done in the interest of humanity, of course, including foods with vaccines in them, foods that can go weeks without spoiling, and foods that have pesticides genetically implanted in them. But what if you're deathly allergic to certain of these peanuts-in-potato concoctions, or what if we don't want our children consuming foods with unknown vaccines and sex-hormones (yes, sex hormones, too, are being added by the beneficent life-science people) . . . and what the holy hell do you mean that pesticides are genetically implanted in the foods?!

No problem, you think, I don't have to buy their GA, GM, GMO, GE, or whatever other GD term they apply to the Frankenfoods that come out of their laboratory larder. You wish. Do your kids drink Coca Cola, have you had a McDonald's french fry, has Kraft salad dressing been on your table, have you poured a cup of Nestle's hot chocolate, is Land o' Lakes butter in your fridge, do you use NutraSweet, and-get this-have you fed your babies with Similac infant formula? Welcome to the Brave New Food World. All of these products have genetically manipulated ingredients in them. In all, more than 30,000 food products on America's grocery shelves today-from milk to sodas, from Big Macs to tofu burgers-contain genetically manipulated organisms. Altered seeds from the labs of biotech giants now are used to plant 25 percent of America's corn crop, 30 percent of the soybeans, 40 percent of cotton, and 50 percent of canola.

Yes, but, surely they're safe . . . right? The government has tested each of these to assure that nothing bad can happen from eating this altered assortment of DNA, hasn't it? Well, Pollyanna, er, uh (how shall I put this?), um: "No." Still, the FDA and EPA insist that genetically engineered foods are safe. Actually, these so-called public watchdogs cleverly put their assurances in the negative, asserting that the bio-engineered goodies "have not been proven to be un-safe." **As the great Native-American activist and writer Vine Deloria once said, "Sure you can trust the government. Ask an Indian."** Bottom line: There have been no long-term human tests on these products. The government, at the behest of the biotech manufacturers, has simply shoved the burden of proof onto us consumers, which is to say that you and your family literally are the guinea pigs in this grand genetic experiment.

Are the products safe? Three ways to check it out: ONE, ask the insurance industry. It declines to provide long-term insurance for the corporations or farmers engaged in these biotech adventures. What if some of these altered genetic genes get out of the bottle and taint other crops or hybridize into something not only unforeseen but destructive-who is liable? These "What ifs" already are happening-87,000 bags of organic corn chips sent from the U.S. to Europe were rejected this year because tests by the importer found they contained genetically altered corn. It turns out the organic corn from which the chips were made had been contaminated by cross-pollination from some of the surrounding farms raising the altered varieties of corn. All 87,000 bags were destroyed.

TWO, ask the butterflies. Half of North America's beautiful, orange and black monarch butterflies breed in the Midwest corn belt, where the monarch caterpillars sole food supply is the milkweed plant that frequently grows along the fence rows of the cornfields. Millions of acres of this corn is now of the Bt variety-genetically engineered by Monsanto, DuPont, and Novartis to contain the Bt toxin throughout each corn plant. The Bt is meant to kill the corn borer that feeds on the crop. The corporations claimed there was zero chance of damage to "non-targeted" insects, birds, or other life. But, oops, a Cornell University research team reported in May that windborne pollen from the altered corn can kill the monarchs. In a controlled study, some milkweed leaves were dusted with Bt corn pollen. Half of the monarch caterpillars that ate these leaves died, and those that survived only grew to half their normal size. Monarchs that ate milkweed dusted with

non-altered corn pollen did just fine. "Why is it that this study was not done before the approval of Bt corn?" asked the Union of Concerned Scientists. "This is 20 million acres of Bt corn too late. This should serve as a warning that there are more unpleasant surprises ahead," the group said.

THREE, and most important, ask yourself. Ask yourself why the industry and government, in a cabal of avarice and arrogance, has unleashed this technology so quickly and quietly. The sudden surge in these crops has come in just the last few years without any public debate. Yet, whether you want it or not, unless you are buying nothing but certified organic food, chances are that your family is consuming huge amounts of genetically-altered foods, completely unaware that you're doing so. Also, if this stuff is so safe, ask yourself why there is no requirement that it be labeled so you can know what you're getting? The food industry has to label for salt, fat, and cholesterol content, letting consumers decide for themselves which products they want to buy-yet, we aren't being told which food bin or package contains the corn that's had its DNA rearranged, or which carton has the milk with artificial sex hormones in it?

The good news is that the rebellion against this corporate bullying is building around the globe. In Japan, two-thirds of the country's local governments have petitioned to compel national labeling of any genetically-altered food. In India, the supreme court upheld a ban on the testing of such crops, and enraged farmers have torched fields suspected of testing for Monsanto. In England, the British Medical Association has called for a ban on growing the crops and on the sale of the food products there, adding its prestige to Prince Charles' royal vow that biotech food would never pass his lips. The public reaction in Europe is so heatedly negative that the very name Monsanto is now an epithet, and such major food marketers as Unilever, Nestle, and Cadbury-Schweppes have rushed out in recent days to declare their products to be biotech-free. Likewise, the largest supermarket chains in six European countries have made a public commitment that they will not sell genetically-altered products.

In these places, Frankenfood has become a major political issue-a member of the British Parliament even denounced Monsanto in the House of Commons as "Public Enemy No. 1." Yet, here politicians and the general public are quiet about it, not because they approve, but because the companies, the government, and the media have kept the issue buried. It won't stay buried, though. Thanks to activist groups and independent news outlets (including this newsletter and my radio broadcasts), word is spreading that this is being done to us and, as everywhere else in the world, this will become an explosive issue. They can't mess with what people feed their babies and think there'll be no consequences. Before it's over, people here will be hunting the perpetrators of this perversion with dogs.

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