Biotechnology's string of consequence

What do consumers want? What should and could the oilseeds industry do to minimize further public relations damage and to increase consumer confidence?

These questions and more were addressed by Alain Dini of Aventis and Huib Vigeveno of Unilever at the 71st World Congress of the International Association of Seed Crushers, held May 17-19.

Vigeveno started by drawing attention to the string connecting a tea bag to its label. Some consumer and environmental groups have expressed concern as to whether genetically modified cotton fiber is used to make the tea-bag strings, he said.

"The discussion about the string on the tea bag in fact gives a very clear picture of what it's all about," Vigeveno said. "A number of consumer, environmental, and animal rights organizations do not merely oppose the presence of GM (genetically modified) raw materials in the food chain . . . they are opposed to modern biotechnology per se, however useful any specific application may be."

Added to this, consumer confidence in industry is at its lowest point in Europe, Vigeveno added, pointing to a European survey that found that industry and political parties finish last in credibility and consumer confidence, while consumer organizations take the lead. Dini also used these figures in his talk and told attendees that “there is no genetically improved commercial product today on the market with a quality trait.”

"The climate in which we want to win over the consumer . . . is therefore icy-cold," Vigeveno said, "and that's putting in mildly."

However, this was contrasted with the situation in the United States, where consumers have “rock-solid” confidence in the U.S. Food and Drug Administration’s advice on what is safe to eat. Dini pointed out that findings from a similar confidence survey conducted in the United States were almost the opposite of those in Europe, with consumers lending greater credibility to medical associations, institutes, and government agencies, as well as to biotech firms.

Proposed solutions to this problem vary. Vigeveno called for greater choice of products. Instead of fighting against consumer concerns over GM foods, companies should offer a choice of GM, non-GM or identity-preserved (IP), and organic foods, Vigeveno said, especially as labeling regulations in Europe and elsewhere are forcing companies to define their products.

Vigeveno described the positive claim label “100% GMO-free” as nearly impossible to obtain. In order to qualify, companies must be able to prove that nowhere in the line of production did the product come into contact with anything GM. Cheese from the milk of a cow that has had a vaccine produced via biotechnology may be excluded under this rule, he said.

Products that contain GMO-origin proteins or DNA must be labeled as such, Vigeveno explained, a practice that has not directly hurt sales figures at Unilever. However, consumer groups tend to blacklist and publicly criticize these products, especially in Germany, Austria, Scandinavia, and the United Kingdom, he said.

The third category is for products with less than 1% traceable GMO. In order to qualify, the addition of GMOs to the product must be inadvertent and careful adherence to an IP system must be proved by certification throughout the production process, Vigeveno said.

No label is necessary if this strict system of protocol is followed. However, neither are positive claims allowed.

"Just try telling consumers that they must pay more for an identical but unlabeled product," Vigeveno said, clearly exasperated. "I assure you it won't work."

In an effort to bypass the problems Unilever sees as inherent in the current system of labeling, it is calling for a merger of the 100% GMO-free and less than 1% traceable GMO categories, Vigeveno said, both of which would therefore be allowed to carry a positive claim. Products without GMOs would be unlabeled, he explained, and consumers would have to assume some GMOs might be present in such products. They could find more information about the products through information lines, leaflets, or a company’s Internet page.

In order for this proposal to work, however, IP animal feed streams are necessary, he said, which means animal
feed suppliers in North and South America will have to invest in IP systems. Otherwise, meat, dairy, and eggs may not qualify for the GMO-free label. In addition, Vigeveno said the consumer and environmental groups he has contacted are open to the idea because the current rules also affect so-called "eco" food products, making production expensive and difficult.

Dini agreed with Vigeveno's proposal to support consumer choice. He also suggested other ideas to increase GMO acceptance. He urged more research into GMOs that have specific characteristics of interest to consumers, such as high-stearic canola oil, low-saturated fat soybean oil, and high-oleic soybean oil, and increased access to biotechnology in developing nations. Also, people must be better educated to understand biotechnology. In a recent survey, 81% said they didn't feel adequately informed about biotechnology, but 72% of those polled said they would take time to increase their understanding of advanced biotechnology, Dini said.

**Windsor knot**

Britain's royal family is split 2–1, thus far, over GM organisms. Can tabloid coverage of their food fight be far behind?

Prince Charles, an organic farmer, is a vocal critic of biotechnology. Recently, though, his father and sister spoke out in support of scientific advancement.

Princess Anne, who is president of the British Association for the Advancement of Science, told *The Grocer* magazine in June that it is a "huge oversimplification to say all farming ought to be organic or there should be no GM foods. I'm sorry, but life isn't that simple."

She added that "if you consider things in terms of overall production and sheer weight of numbers, of supporting a population which has so hugely increased, then organics is not the whole answer."

Several days later Prince Phillip was quoted as saying that "what people forget is that the introduction of exotic species, like, for instance, the introduction of the gray squirrel into this country, is going to or has done far more damage than a genetically modified piece of potato."

No published comments yet have been attributed to Queen Elizabeth.

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