

He said/She said: Are GMO “secrets” just inconvenient truths?

Well known activist and author Robyn O'Brien's recent [post](#) on the Huffington Post's Food for Thought blog slams GMOs in nine points. Kevin Folta, a plant geneticist, [responds](#) on Biology Fortified's blog in kind.

Food for Thought is sponsored by Chipotle and “committed to telling stories that urge us to look beyond the surface and think about the consequences of the food we eat,” Arianna Huffington, the editor-in-chief, [wrote](#) back in October when the section launched.

Biology Fortified is an education non-profit focusing on encouraging discussion of issues in biology, with particular emphasis on genetics and genetic engineering in agriculture.

This winter Chipotle released a web series title: [Farmed and Dangerous](#), a satire that exposes the “outrageously twisted and utterly unsustainable world of industrial agriculture.” The Huffington Post has posted a number of articles exploring the different themes raised in the series, including O'Brien's titled: Nine Dirty Little Secrets About GMOs.

Folta begins his response post, Nine Dirty Little Secrets? One Inconvenient Truth, by stating that he and O'Brien actually do agree on issues like better nutrition and healthier eating. “Where we part ways is on her less-than-scientific treatment of transgenic technology,” he writes.

Folta analyses each of O'Brien's secrets, such as the fact that the EPA regulates genetically engineered corn as a pesticide:

O'Brien: EPA now regulates this genetically engineered corn as a pesticide. Seriously, if you had the choice on your kitchen table or at a BBQ between a corn regulated by the EPA as a pesticide and one that wasn't, which would you choose? No brainer. We should know which one is the pesticide and which foods it is going into.

Folta: Robyn likes to play this one because of the fear it creates. Note, this is the *EPA, the organization that deals with environmental concerns*. Yes, they consider Bt corn a pesticide because it has activity against larvae of certain moths and butterflies. It could have ecological impact. It is therefore examined as a pesticide. This is the oversight and regulation that people like her claim does not exist. Those of us that think about the science know that the Bt protein has specific mechanisms of action against certain caterpillars and is not effective against non-target animals. It has no effects on humans. It is appropriate that its environmental impacts are considered.

Labeling is gaining a lot of airtime in the GMO debate. Here are both writers thoughts on the subject:

O'Brien: Labels mean liability: Right now the companies using these genetically engineered foods want a ban on state labeling and are trying to stop a growing call for mandatory national labeling. Why? Because without labels, this “GMO Buyers Club” can claim that there is no evidence that these crops have ever caused any harm. And guess what? Without labels, they are right, there is no evidence. Labels would bring accountability, traceability and liability. It's no wonder that the food industry is so allergic to labeling these genetically engineered ingredients in the United States. An allergic reaction to food sends someone to the ER once every three minutes.

We label the inside parts of our cars, our cell phones and our computers, so why is the chemical industry so cloaked about what goes into our food?

Can you imagine if Intel operated this way? There would be no Intel Inside and no way of knowing which parts of the operating system were functioning as promised and which parts might be detrimental to the system.

We've got GMO Inside our food, but no label to tell us.

The chemical industry argues that labeling would drive up food costs, and they would have to pass these added expenses on to consumers. But it doesn't ring true, especially when you look at how American food companies label these ingredients in the products that they sell overseas and at the number of label changes for pink ribbons, Easter Bunnies or holiday packaging.

Without labels on genetically engineered ingredients, the industry can claim “no evidence of harm.” And they are right. Without labels, there is no traceability, accountability and liability. No way for these companies to be held accountable for the costs that they are externalizing onto society, our farmers, their farms and our economy.

Folta: Robyn says that if it is not labeled as GMO, then there's no way to demonstrate that the foods cause harm. Another supreme cop out. Of course, she forgets that scientists could do carefully controlled, reproducible experiments. That's the best way to demonstrate that the products are harmful. But more importantly, *if the food is harmful, then people will be harmed*. The Jack-in-the-Box hamburger wasn't labeled “CONTAINS E. coli OH157”. The organic spinach didn't have a label that said, “Warning Contains Salmonella”. If food makes people sick we know, and we know fast.

O'Brien starts and finishes her post with a call for transparency, while Folta notes that many of the issues O'Brien brings up are not specific to GMOs and calls the Huffington Post “sad” for allowing such a “simplistic analysis” on the site.

Additional Resources:

- [Evaluating competing claims about genetically modified crops](#), Journal of Economic Perspectives

- [GMO 'He Said/She Said'? Ethics debate intensifies over retraction of flawed Séralini rat study](#), Genetic Literacy Project
- [Video: Hofstra GMO debate highlights science v precautionary fears](#), Genetic Literacy Project