

Polling in GMO debate fails to capture meaningful insight into public perception

Several of my colleagues recently conducted a survey in Key West, FL, where the Mosquito Control Board has proposed the use of Oxitech's genetically-modified mosquitoes as a strategy to reduce the spread of dengue fever. Reporting from a door-to-door survey, Elizabeth Pitts and Michael Cobb (unpublished manuscript) asked whether residents supported the public release of GM mosquitos.

With a clear majority of support, and opposition under 25% of survey respondents, we might assume that little needs to be done – either by the company developing the mosquito or the state agency that wishes to try it. Only the anti-GM campaigners have a lot of work to do – or maybe such numbers suggest that they should just give up and focus on something else.

But the story does not and should not end there. The survey protocol also asked respondents to describe the benefits and risks of GM mosquitos – enabling the coding of their open-ended responses.

First, despite having just been told a short version of how GM mosquitos would work to control the spread of dengue fever, very few respondents seemed to have internalized or understood this key point. Second, nearly one-third of respondents had no response at all to either the benefits or hazards questions – suggesting a lack of engagement and/or knowledge with the topic. Third, nearly 40% of respondents expressed one or more concerns, many of which are at least superficially reasonable (e.g., questions about ecological consequences or unintended impacts on human health).

To me, these data reveal the superficiality of the “approval rating” as a measure of public perception; yet, those are the data that are easiest to measure and most tempting for our media to report and pundits to interpret. I would argue that if we truly care about how non-experts perceive an emerging technology – whether for democratic or commercial purposes – we need to focus on more messy forms of measurement and engagement. These might be more expensive, less clear-cut, and perhaps somewhat internally inconsistent, but they will give us more insight.

Read the full, original article: What's that hiding behind the poll? Perceiving public perceptions of biotechnology