

## Nassim Taleb's disastrously naive GMO disaster scenario

Nassim Taleb, author of "The Black Swan" and other books, and his co-authors on a recent [working paper](#) suggest that we adopt the "precautionary principle."

The precautionary principle (PP) states that if an action or policy has a suspected risk of causing severe harm to the public domain (affecting general health or the environment globally), the action should not be taken in the absence of scientific near-certainty about its safety. Under these conditions,

the burden of proof about absence of harm falls on those proposing an action, not those opposing it.

Taleb et al. apply the PP to the problem of genetically modified food, or GMOs, and conclude that the technology shouldn't be used. The key question is whether GMOs, whatever their advantages, really have the potential to cause truly ruinous harm. This question has nothing to do with probability or decision theory, and everything to do with biology. Taleb et al. don't spin a convincing story for how GMOs might destroy us.

The basic GMO disaster story goes something like this: Genes from GMO crops diffuse into the general population, as GMO plants interbreed with surrounding non-GMO plants. This creates a global monoculture, which will then put us at risk of a pandemic disease that causes a catastrophic crop failure. That would then put humanity on the brink of starvation.

I see problems with every link in this narrative chain.

**Read full, original story:** [Black Swans, Frankenfoods and Disaster Fairy Tales](#)