

Washington Post: Denying scientific consensus on GMOs victimizes developing countries

But the biggest gap between public opinion and scientific consensus in the United States is not in the realm of vaccines, global warming or evolution but regarding the safety of genetically modified (GM) foods.

According to a survey conducted by the Pew Research Center in association with the American Association for the Advancement of Science, 88 percent of scientists believe GM foods are safe to eat, compared with only 37 percent of the public — a gap of 51 percentage points.

The anti-GM movement seems to be fueled by a combination of anti-corporate suspicion, small-farm nostalgia and anxiety about unfamiliar technologies. It raises questions of environmental safety and corporate control as well as food safety. Some would argue that, unlike climate-change denialism or vaccine resistance, it's harmless even if baseless — who cares if Manischewitz now feels compelled to offer a line of GM-free kosher foods?

Unfortunately, this form of denialism also has victims, and they're not the folks who may choose to pay a few cents more for GM-free matzo. As a World Resources Institute paper points out, farmers need to close a 69 percent gap between the crops they produced in 2006 and the food the world will need, given population growth, by 2050.

Though far from the only solution to this challenge, genetic modification can provide seeds that are more resistant to pests, drought or disease and that produce greater yields with less water or in poorer soil. They could be, in other words, one significant component to avoiding mass hunger over the next generation. Unfortunately, resistance in rich, consuming nations discourages innovation and makes it more difficult for farmers in poor countries to adopt useful new technologies.

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