

Cultural differences over food and GMOs dog US-Europe trade talks

Everyone in agriculture—from farmers, to agribusiness executives, to the professors who conduct agricultural research—says that decisions ranging from what to eat to settling international trade conflicts should be based on science.

But developments recently have raised questions about how much people should trust agricultural science and scientists. How can scientists make decisions that seem so questionable?

The difficulties that U.S. and European Union negotiators are having in dealing with genetic modification and washing chickens with chlorine in the proposed Trans-Atlantic Trade and Investment Partnership also show that other approaches may be needed.

Scientists say genetic modification, for example, is safe, but at a January event on T-TIP sponsored by the International Food Policy Research Institute and the Berlin-based Ecological Institute, David Orden, a FAPRI researcher and professor at Virginia Tech, observed that the problem is “science is never absolutely certain.”

German Federal Minister of Food and Agriculture Christian Schmidt noted during a recent trip to Washington that “You can’t just meet this with science issues. You have to have cultural understanding.”

Even AGree, the U.S. foundation-financed collaborative initiative to try to reach consensus on big issues facing agriculture could not reach agreement on genetic modification.

At an event last fall at the National Geographic Society to encourage more public discussion on food and agriculture, Deb Atwood, the executive director of AGree, said of genetic modification, “We do not have a dogma in that fight.” But the group had agreed, Atwood said, “to have the platform for respectful exchange that includes science and values. It is ‘science plus.’”

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