

Viewpoint: Preaching to the choir won't win over GMO skeptics

Editor's note: Robert Arnason is an agriculture journalist.

In 2017 I interviewed about 800 to 1,200 people about agriculture, agronomy, science and food.

Looking back at the responses, to probably more than 3,000 questions, one comment stands above the rest.

It came from Kevin Folta, professor and chair of the University of Florida horticultural sciences department and a well-known science communicator. Folta frequently talks about genetically modified foods and other tools of modern agriculture.

During our interview, I asked what he's learned from hundreds of speeches and hundreds of hours spent on social media, talking to the public about GM technology and pesticides.

"It only took me 12 years, of really working hard to share science and give people facts, to realize that it wasn't working," he said. "I was able to preach to the choir. That worked great. The choir was happy ... but I wasn't reaching the people who were just concerned. The people in the middle who didn't know, one way or the other."

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Folta's comment reinforced what I've heard from other plant scientists and advocates of modern agriculture. Emphasizing "the science" to explain the safety of GM foods, pesticides or growth hormones in beef cattle is pretty much useless.

Having the science in your back pocket is necessary but it should stay there until you've established a relationship, emotional connection or common ground with the listener.

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