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# Great GMO debate

by Charles Redell - 1.4.09

The organic food sector is soaring: While 2009 numbers were unknown at the time of this writing, the sector saw $22.9 billion in U.S. sales in 2008, representing 15.8 percent growth from 2007, according to the Organic Trade Association (OTA). Meanwhile total U.S. food sales grew less than 5 percent.

In 2009, Whole Foods Market Inc. (Nasdaq: WFMI) brought in $425 million in investment—more venture capital than any other U.S. "green" company ("Top 15 VC investments in U.S. cleantech companies" p. 46]. It's no wonder purveyors of genetically modified (GM) seeds such as Monsanto (NYSE: MON) have been trying to get their share of the bounty. What does that mean for growers, certifiers and retailers? Perhaps the GM elephant in the room might take a seat at the table in 2010. The prospect of diminishing global water supplies and a growing world population is providing some leverage for proponents of GM crops, who say they can play a role in sustainable agriculture.

"There's a lot of money at stake," says Scott Exo, executive director of Portland-based Food Alliance. "In part it's because we've had relative success in making sustainable agriculture an important public issue."

The success of the organic food industry—which nearly doubled its market share in less than five years—means even Food Alliance, one of the strictest food-certification standards in the nation, may face the GM conversation in the coming year. "That may happen … given the fact that the issue is rising in prominence," Exo says. He says he believes that if it does come up, Food Alliance's board of directors would come to the same conclusion it did about GM crops a decade ago and keep them off certified farms.

The sustainable agriculture market may be large and growing, but the market for GM crops is positively huge. In 2007, 91 percent of soy, 87 percent of cotton, and 73 percent of corn grown in the United States were GM crops, according to U.S. Department of Agriculture. This translates into massive industry profits. Monsanto, the largest company in the sector, reported more than $6 billion in profit for 4Q 2009, a 9 percent increase from 2008. The conversation comes at a pivotal moment as the organic farming industry struggles to move beyond simply organic agriculture and define what it truly means to grow food sustainably. Numerous certifications threaten to dilute the definition of sustainability, explains Jim Pierce, the Food Trade Sustainability Leadership Association's representative in a process to develop an

American National Standard Institute (ANSI)-accredited Sustainable Agriculture standard.

“Those of us in the organic community started seeing the hijacking of the word ‘sustainable,’” Pierce says. “We started hearing Monsanto and corn growers call themselves sustainable and it became pretty obvious that we need … to legitimize that word.” The ANSI standard-development process is sponsored by Madison, Wis.–based Leonardo Academy. It includes representatives from both ends of the sustainability spectrum, including farmers who grow GM crops. For Ken McCauley, owner of K & M Farms Inc. in northeast Kansas, and the representative of the National Corn Growers’ Association in the process, being able to get higher yields out of the same amount of land is a sustainable farming practice.

Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and others have been criticized for using technology such as GM crops to feed the hungry in developing nations. Yet none other than Stewart Brand, who edited “The Whole Earth Catalog” in the 1960s, says GM crops are an essential component in feeding an increasingly hungry and crowded world. “This is a technology which is really, really an improvement across the board for nutrition, for the economics of the issues and certainly for the ecology,” he told Sustainable Industries during an interview at West Coast Green in October 2009. “Genetically engineered crops are ‘green.’”

Others who agree with Brand relate the use of GM crops to the spread of no-till farming, reduced herbicide use and less need for irrigation of crops. “We think we are sustainable agriculture,” says Dr. Michael Wach, managing director of Science and Regulatory Affairs for the Biotechnology Industry Organization (BIO), an industry trade group. “If there is a conversation, it’s because [opponents] don’t know all the facts. Biotech crops are an integral part of sustainable agriculture.”

In 2009, BIO spent $5.5 million to lobby congress on the issue, according to OpenSecrets.org which tracks influence spending in Washington, D.C. The site does not list any spending by OTA. As with so many other conversations about sustainability, the social component of the GM seed industry is often forgotten or twisted by marketing machines.

Biotech companies tout their ability to “feed the world,” but claim concerns about the patenting of life are nothing more than superstition. Meanwhile, farmers may see increased yields with GM seeds, but they are prohibited by many GM seed companies from collecting seeds. They end up spending their increased profits with industry giants such as Monsanto in order to stay competitive, according to Pierce. Ending this cycle is the key to ending the GM conversation once and for all, if his side can convince conventional farmers to advocate for them.

“Companies aren’t motivated to listen to the organic community because we don’t give them any money,” he says. “We’re going to look at it from the three pillars [of sustainability] including economic and social. When we lay those weighted decisions on the table, everybody except the biotech companies are going to start seeing inherent problems.”

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