

U.S. Uneasy About Biotech Food

Americans Lack Knowledge, Faith in FDA's Accuracy, Poll Finds

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Ten years after genetically engineered crops were first planted commercially in the United States, Americans remain ill-informed about and uncomfortable with biotech food, according to the fifth annual survey on the topic, released yesterday.

People vastly underestimate how much gene-altered food they are already consuming, lean toward wanting greater regulation of such crops and have less faith than ever that the Food and Drug Administration will provide accurate information, the survey found.

The poll also confirmed that most Americans, particularly women, do not like the idea of consuming meat or milk from cloned animals -- a view that stands in contrast to scientific evidence that cloned food is safe. The FDA recently said it is close to allowing such food on the market.

Michael Fernandez, executive director of the Pew Initiative on Food and Biotechnology, which sponsored the survey, said that overall, Americans are "still generally uncertain" about genetically modified and cloned foods. "How the next generation of biotech products is introduced -- and consumers' trust in the regulation of GM foods -- will be critical in shaping U.S. attitudes in the long term."

In the five years since Pew began plumbing American views of genetically engineered food, U.S. acreage in such crops has grown substantially. Today, 89 percent of soybeans, 83 percent of cotton and 61 percent of corn is genetically engineered to resist weed-killing chemicals or to help the plants make their own insecticides.

Because most processed foods contain at least small amounts of soy lecithin, corn syrup or related ingredients, almost everyone in the United States has consumed some amount of gene-altered food.

That quiet revolution has been punctuated by occasional high-profile problems, including the 2000 finding of StarLink corn, unapproved for human consumption, in many food products, and the recent revelation that the U.S. long grain rice crop has been contaminated with an experimental variety of gene-altered rice.

In this year's survey, conducted by the Mellman Group, one-quarter of the 1,000 adults polled thought they had ever eaten gene-altered food, an indication that Americans have "very little in-depth knowledge of the topic," according to a Pew summary.

Support for marketing of genetically modified food has remained flat since 2001 at 27 percent, with opposition dropping from 58 percent in 2001 to 46 percent this year.

The proportion of Americans who say they "don't know" if gene-modified foods are safe has shrunk since 2001, while the "safe" and "unsafe" camps grew by about 5 percent each: 34 percent think they are safe, while 29 percent say they are not.

Of those who claim to have at least a rudimentary sense of how engineered foods are regulated, 41 percent say they would like to see more stringent rules, and 16 percent say there is already too much regulation.

Consuming cloned animals -- addressed in the poll for the first time -- popped up as a hot-button issue. Even among those who said they had no objection to eating genetically engineered foods, 34 percent were comfortable with animal cloning, while 51 percent were not.

Religion played a big role in those opinions. Among those who said they attend religious services only "a few times a year or less," 30 percent were comfortable with animal cloning, and 54 percent were not. Among those who attend weekly religious services, 17 percent were comfortable with cloning, and 70 percent were not.

Asked which sources they trust "a great deal" for information about gene-altered foods, "friends and family" ranked highest, at 37 percent. Only 29 percent named the FDA, continuing a steady drop from 41 percent in 2001.

The least trustworthy source, garnering 11 percent, was the news media. But remember, you read it here first.