

BIOTECHNOLOGY | OPPOSING VIEWS

# FAO takes heat for alleged biotech bias

Food security | A presentation by the FAO critical of chemical use and genetically modified seed sparked criticism

BY BARRY WILSON

OTTAWA BUREAU

MONTREAL — Near the end of a conference on global food insecurity that occasionally veered into promotion of biotechnology and high input agriculture as the answer, Washington-based specialist Eugene Terry had a plea for balance.

Quit making the debate so stark and either-or, he urged the conference organized by McGill University.

The agricultural research and development specialist suggested a newly created McGill Institute for Global Food Security take the issue on as one of its first projects.

“I believe this debate has taken an unhelpful direction because of the flawed way the issue is presented,” he said Oct. 21.

“Begin to create a sensible outlook on how to conduct this debate.”

The sensitivity of the issue was clear during the conference when a senior United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization official included the current results of an FAO online survey about sustainable agriculture in her presentation on biodiversity, nutrition and sustainable diets.

The slide, presented by Barbara Burlingame, senior officer and leader of FAO’s nutrition requirements and assessment group, showed rejection by many responding to the survey of heavy chemical use and monoculture production.

Gordon Bacon, president of Pulse Canada, criticized the chart and argued that the output should be judged and not the process.

“Rather than say chemical use is bad or not sustainable, let’s look at the end product, the organic matter in the soil, the product produced,” he said.

“A survey like that biases the result because it is open to overrepresentation from people who object to the process.”

Marco Ferroni, Swiss-based executive director of the Syngenta Foundation for Sustainable Agriculture, berated her for a bias against modern agriculture.

In a later interview, Burlingame said she believes that agriculture based on intensive chemical use is unsustainable and that reliance on monoculture crops at the expense of biodiversity produces less nutritious food.

But she said the chart was a report on the results of an online survey being run by FAO and mainly responded to by nutritionists.

“This has not been hijacked by the organic movement and the FAO is not biasing this survey one way or the other,” she said.

“We strive for a balance in our outlook. But in this debate, you can’t win with the extremes if you are trying to be in the middle.”

The Syngenta Foundation was one of the sponsors of the McGill conference.

Later, Ferroni took advantage of being a member of two panels to promote agricultural chemical use and modified seed varieties as part of the solution to world food insecurity.

“Be open minded when addressing technologies,” he said.

“Environment versus technology is a false choice.”

He said organic production is part of the mix but not the answer to food insecurity or the improvement of small-scale developing world farmers who are the focus of Syngenta Foundation work.

Ferroni said the answer to farmer sustainability and food insecurity in developing countries is to increase yields. Management practices, chemicals and genetically enhanced seeds are part of the solution.

“I know you can’t feed the world at affordable prices without use of technology and science,” he said.

The Syngenta Foundation official condemned what he said were false premises promoted by activists in developed countries — “food sovereignty, “poverty rhetoric,” “peasant romanticism,” rejection of company intellectual property rights over seed they have developed and “disdain for the private sector.”

Ferroni argued that the public sector should co-operate with private companies to help create developing world productivity and markets. It includes investment in infrastructure and research as well as market-friendly regulations.

“The private sector has no incentive to go where there is not a business case,” he said.

***We strive for a balance in our outlook. But in this debate, you can’t win with the extremes if you are trying to be in the middle.***

BARBARA BURLINGAME

FAO OFFICIAL



access=subscriber section=news,crops,none