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U.S. consumers accepting

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American farmers have rapidly adopted seeds developed through modern biotechnology, but their crops have faced organized opposition in some parts of the world, especially in Europe. I have reviewed global opinion surveys over the past decade and found that public perceptions about biotechnology are influenced by media information, confidence in government, cultural background and other factors.

American consumers have remained consistently positive about biotechnology. More than two-thirds are willing to buy food crops developed through biotechnology that use fewer chemical pesticides. Unlike in Europe, biotechnology has not become a "top-of-mind" issue for most U.S. consumers. Surveys since 1992 show that only about one-third of U.S. consumers have heard or read about biotechnology. News about the cloned sheep pushed awareness to 50 percent in March 1997. Awareness then dropped, not to rise again until September 1999 - after three newsmagazines had cover stories on the subject. Surveys in January and February show that awareness has fallen back to just over one-third in the United States.

Such swings reflect the fact that most people get their information about biotechnology from the media. Media coverage in the United States generally has been balanced, which helps account for our relatively high acceptance levels. By contrast, the European media have played upon fear of the unknown and relied on emotional terms such as "Frankenfood." The European media have also tended to accept claims without question.

Also fueling the lack of awareness is the fact that many people no longer have a connection to agriculture. Many are unaware that all foods are derived from plants or animals that have been genetically modified through traditional (but imprecise) breeding methods. Moreover, the complex science behind modern biotechnology can be intimidating for many people. Just as people need not know computer programming to use the Internet, we don't have to understand molecular biology to recognize the benefits of biotechnology. U.S. consumers look to health professionals and scientific experts for the information they need and place relatively little trust in activists who oppose biotechnology.

Cultural differences are also a factor. The American culture is more likely to support and reward development of innovative technology. We tend to be more optimistic about the future, while many Europeans long for the past. Some Europeans express intense opposition to American food trends and products. Europeans also want to protect their small, inefficient farms to maintain open space and rural employment. Such forces underlie much of the European Union's anxiety about agricultural biotech - especially since it is perceived as an "American invention."

Biotechnology is at a crossroads in terms of public acceptance. International developments over the next year will have a major influence on the long-term viability of the biotechnology sector. Several major initiatives are under way to strengthen oversight and consumer confidence. Both the FDA and U.S. Department of Agriculture have opened their regulatory systems to outside review and public comment. The biotechnology industry, university scientists and others are conducting extensive educational programs.

Consumers will accept biotech foods if they see a benefit to themselves or to society - and if the price is right. Our responses to foods developed through biotechnology are basically the same as for any other food, research has shown: Taste, nutrition, price, safety and convenience are the major factors that influence our decisions about which foods to eat.