

Geneva Experiment Station Hosts Educational Tours on GMOs

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by Linda McCandless

GENEVA, NY: In the last year, the furor over genetically modified organisms has crossed the Atlantic. The debate is a hot topic with consumers in Europe and becoming increasingly heated in the United States.

Cornell's New York State Agricultural Experiment Station in Geneva, NY, is taking steps to inform people about the topic. Over the summer, community leaders, local and state legislators and staffers, were invited to the Station for a series of workshops to educate them about the issues, the technology, the degree of regulatory oversight, and the importance of agricultural biotechnology in agriculture. "We scientists are not accustomed to explaining our work to the public, but it is increasingly important that we do so," said Director Jim Hunter.



Suggested caption: Herb Aldwinckle, Cornell professor of plant pathology, discusses the GMO issue with community leaders in Geneva, NY. CREDIT: K.Stevens/NYSAES /Cornell

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Cornell's College of Agriculture and Life Sciences is a partner in the Geneva effort to fulfill an educational role by publicly providing information on the GMO issue. Susan Henry, dean of the college, has formed a GMO Advisory Group and Working Group whose mission is to "educate people about the issues involved in agricultural biotechnology and GMOs, to help inform the dialogue on the risks and benefits of this technology, and to facilitate enlightened public discussion."

Seven two-hour discussions were held at the Experiment Station in July with local community leaders. On July 27, legislative staffers from Albany, whose responsibilities include consumer affairs, higher education in the Division of the Budget, agricultural issues, food, farm and nutrition, and budget analysis, attended an all-day workshop on GMOs and toured the Station. Those involved in the presentations included Herb Aldwinckle, professor of plant pathology, Tony Shelton, professor of entomology, Jim Shanahan, associate professor of communications, and Milt Zaitlin, emeritus professor of plant pathology.

In August, local outreach efforts continue at Cornell staffed exhibits at Empire Farm Days in Seneca Falls, NY, as well as Cornell Fruit Field Days and the Whale Watch, both in Geneva. Sessions are planned in the fall with legislators, chefs and food writer from the Culinary Institute, and others.

For presentations at the Experiment Station, Aldwinckle led the groups on a trip to a local apple orchard that is severely infected by fire blight as one instance of a 100-year-old problem that has resisted conventional breeding solutions. Then the groups toured a plot of five-year-old fire blight-resistant trees. Aldwinckle said the real hope for growers is to fight the disease with genetically engineered plants. The Experiment Station is involved in a federally funded cooperative research project with Michigan State University on the problem.

After the field tour, the groups learned more about the technologies involved, how genetically engineered crops are used, and some of the issues involved in the current debate. Ample time was left for discussion and questions.

"I made the point that genetically engineered crops have a lot of potential to help people," said Aldwinckle. "Genetically improved varieties have the potential to greatly reduce the use of chemical pesticides, and so benefit the environment as well as the farmer and the consumer. Herbicide-resistant crops allow the effective use of herbicides that are more environmentally-friendly and more economic to grow. In the future, we expect genetic improvements in nutritional quality and shelf life, increased ability of crops to grow in adverse soil and weather conditions, and the production of vaccines, antibodies and other agriceuticals in plants. Strict federal regulations are designed to insure that genetically engineered crops are safe for the consumer and the environment."

The group also discussed the impact of genetically engineered crops on the environment, including the impact of Bt corn on Monarch butterflies. "I pointed out the need to consider the net effects in the real world, not under artificial conditions in the laboratory and field," said Aldwinckle. "For example, most milkweeds on which Monarch larvae feed do not grow within 10 feet of cornfields. Non-Bt corn needs to be sprayed with chemical insecticide, which drifts out of fields and is lethal to Monarchs."

"The staff did an excellent job talking about an issue that is important for the Geneva community now and in the future," said Rich Rising, Geneva City Manager. "Herb cut through the emotion and got to the heart of the issue. This kind of presentation is very helpful to the Agriculture and Food Technology Park project the Station and the City are working on together."

Materials for the presentation consisted of a series of seven posters written by Cornell faculty and reviewed by communication experts in Ithaca and Geneva. There was a handout of the poster series, and also an informational packet of web sites and reprints. "Agricultural Biotechnology: The GMO Debate," can be viewed on the Experiment Station's web site at <http://www.nysaes.cornell.edu/comm/gmo/>

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The GMO Debate

