
Module V: Preliminary Remarks

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This last session of the conference is an opportunity for all of us to pursue issues that we'd like to have more discussion on, particularly to try to understand how to take steps in moving ahead with our collective reflection on the underlying technology. The 1991 NABC meeting was titled *Agricultural Biotechnology at the Crossroads*, and as I've listened to the presentations over the last couple of days I've reflected upon whether we've come back to the same crossroads or are we at a new one. How have things changed in the last 10 or 12 years as we have pushed to develop this technology, tried to understand its biological, human health, and environmental impacts, dealt with market and consumer acceptance issues, and tried to wrestle with the public policies that have come into play? I think it's fair to say that not all is well in the house of agbiotech. I think that there is a depth of concern about it in a variety of communities and constituencies in the United States and around the world, in NGOs and civil societies that is, simply, unprecedented.

Ralph Hardy and Jim Cook will remember, back in the mid-80s, when I worked with them on the National Research Council Board on Agriculture, that we'd lament the fact that the public wasn't terribly interested in the problems of agriculture from supporting research and technology development to preserving and characterizing germplasm to investing in soil conservation systems and water quality to trying to promote ecologically based pest management and more-healthful nutritional products. Almost every project committee spent at least a few hours thinking what could be done in that project, or what could the National Academy of Sciences do, to capture the interest of the public and get them to understand the importance of the issues that we were dealing with.

This notion, of course, reflected the assumption that if the public became engaged with the issues there would be more support for changes in R&D priorities and funding for research and new policy initiatives. Little did any of us know then that it would be agricultural biotechnology and concerns and questions about it that would, in fact, engage the general public on the broad issues of what kind of food we have, how we produce it, the economic social justice issues in our food and fiber system, and not just in the United States but now in an increasingly globalized world where a small number of companies have such large market shares in many industries. These issues are now clearly being addressed and struggled with on an international level.

So, agricultural biotechnology has accomplished getting the public engaged. Nevertheless, I fear that the technical and scientific communities still have not found a voice in dealing with some of these issues with the public. After we faced that crossroads in 1991, perhaps some of the paths that people rushed down were not thought about as fully as possible. We have among our presenters three individuals who are uniquely qualified and experienced and have been extremely successful in engaging a broad range of publics in the discussion of agricultural science and technology. They will share a number of insights.

When each has made a presentation they will join me on the podium and we'll have a good discussion. Our first speaker is Carolyn Raffensperger.