Just because the science is clear doesn't mean it's the whole story

By Steve Thorngate
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It used to always be energy policy that divided environmentalists: is nuclear power a problem or a solution? Is natural gas just as bad as petroleum, or a useful transitional better-than?

Now that food policy has gone from being the subject everyone ignores to the subject everyone has opinions on, the thing ruining friendships is GMOs. Like all the best coalition-busting fights, the question of genetically modified food pits pragmatism against idealism and scientific progress against tradition. And like most food-related subjects, the debate has implications for not just the environment but also human health, local economies, and global relations.

Molly Ball's new *Atlantic* article on anti-GMO activism is must reading here; it's deeply reported and fair. Like a lot of analysis of the subject, it's all about clashes between politics and science: here's what activists say, here's what science says. Those who are if not *pro*-GMO at least skeptical of the skeptics have started to talk about the anti-GMO movement as akin to the anti-vaccination movement, or even global warming denialism or creationism: it's a denial of scientific evidence—in this case, that GMOs don't pose specific risks to the environment or to human health—in favor of a pick-an-expert approach that supports one's preexisting biases.

I think that's a fair comparision as far as it goes, and I won't be picking up a protest sign and shouting about Frankenfood any time soon. What concerns me about this line of argument, however, is the scientism itself. The thing that makes food policy so interesting—its complex web of implications for *everyone who eats*—also means that any sentence beginning with "scientists say" or "a new study finds" will only tell part of the story. The direct effects of GMO crops on the earth or on eaters may be a question for scientists, but what about their indirect effects on how food is produced and distributed?

As Tom Philpott argued earlier this year, GMOs as practiced—as opposed to "as promised"—are almost entirely about herbicidal and pesticidal innovation, a major

part of the business model of agribusiness giants like Monsanto even before GMOs took over. GMOs' success on these fronts is mixed. Their success in making Monsanto even richer is a bit more straightforward.

And a product that props up Monsanto raises more questions than just whether the product itself is safe. It's also about the wisdom of doubling down on the agricultural and business methods—the monocropping, the consolidation, the overproduction of commodity crops—that got our food system in the mess it's in in the first place. GMOs didn't cause all this, but they do make it that much harder to reverse.

I'm aware that this isn't an argument for an outright GMO ban or even for any particular regulatory approach. My point is only that the implications go farther than the answer we get from saying "Is this safe? Let's ask science!" At our worst, we ethical-foodie types can be motivated more by nostalgia or naivete than by actual information, and there's certainly plenty of this on the anti-GMO scene. But at our best, our concern is not just for quantifiable results but for communities, economies, and our relationship with the land we live on. Appeals to science can devastate the former, but they don't always address the latter.

(If you're as interested in this debate as I am—and I'm aware not everyone here is—take the time to read Nathanael Johnson's studiously non-alarmist series from last year. I'm not quite persuaded by his conclusion—that ultimately GMOs don't matter much—but the series contains a wealth of good information and analysis.)