

The Montreal Gazette
July 20, 2001

Who can you trust?

There's a too-cozy relationship between food regulators and producers

By Lyle Stewart

Who can you trust in the debate over genetically modified foods? It's a tough question, especially when the federal government's regulator of GM foods - the Canadian Food Inspection Agency - is also charged with promoting the biotechnology industry.

The CFIA has taken much political heat for its contradictory dual role. You might remember the controversy over the CFIA funding - to the tune of \$300,000 - of a blatantly pro-biotech insert in an edition of Canadian Living Magazine last year. Some of the government's own scientists feel that the promotional side has the upper hand. Add in the fact the Liberal government has repeatedly tried to gag the scientists who publicly express concerns over the lack of food-safety testing, and there's ample cause to wonder about what is trustworthy and what is public relations.



Certainly there must be other options, and indeed there are. Surfing over to the Food Biotech Communications Network (FBCN) Web site, we learn that this organization "is becoming Canada's leading information source for balanced, science-based facts about food biotechnology and its impact on our food system." The site adds that the group brings all the issue's main stakeholders together, from farmers to consumers. "As a result, FBCN brings both neutrality and strong credibility to the information we provide." Sounds good, you think? Think again.

The FBCN offers information kits, resource sheets on a host of topics, a referral network of experts, even a toll-free information line. By calling that line, you can get a free copy of a booklet titled *A Growing Appetite for Information*. It's a colourful and slickly produced overview of food-biotech issues. "Modern biotechnology is a very powerful tool," it reads. "Its power can impress and intimidate. The arguments for and against are similarly powerful ... and bewildering. Intended as a bias-free zone, this booklet provides a basic introduction to food biotechnology in Canada."

It's co-produced by the FBCN and the Consumers' Association of Canada. And, along with the FBCN's resource sheets and toll-free line, it's funded by the CFIA, though you'd never know that by reading the Web site. According to documents obtained under the Access to Information Act by Canadian Health Coalition researcher Bradford Duplisea, however, the

CFIA was instrumental in developing the materials on offer at the FBCN, including *Growing Appetite for Information*.

Noting that the FBCN's membership includes about 150 corporate partners in biotech and big pharma, Duplisea wonders why the organization would even need taxpayer dollars to produce this subtly pro-biotech material. "Why didn't the CFIA just do these in-house?" Duplisea asks. "Why did they go through such elaborate measures to put these items out as if the CFIA is not associated with them?"

It's a good question. As Duplisea says, "I'm all for free speech. But let's be upfront and above-board. If you're producing this stuff, let it be known."

Similar questions must be raised about the Consumers' Association of Canada. Headed by Jennifer Hillard, the CAC is one of the leading voices against mandatory labeling of GM foods in Canada. Hillard told a Commons committee last year that her group does "not take donations from industry, only from individuals." But according to the documents Duplisea obtained, the CAC does receive hidden funding from the CFIA - and from Monsanto - to produce materials against mandatory labeling and to promote biotechnology. Indeed, the CAC frontperson on labeling until recently was Lee Anne Murphy. Murphy now works for Monsanto and serves on the FBCN's board of directors, an echo of the highly suspect revolving door between government regulators and industry.

If the consumers of Canada were actually against mandatory labeling of GM foods, the CAC might have a defensible position. But they're not. A Pollara poll this spring found near-unanimity - 94 per cent - in favour. But the government, the industry and a supposedly independent consumers' group are against mandatory labeling. And together, they've designed a sophisticated communications strategy based on polling and focus groups - most of it funded by taxpayers - to convince Canadians they're wrong to mistrust Frankenfoods.

It's a typical example of the corporatist role the Liberal government sees for itself: allaying Canadians' concerns and suspicions about an unproven and lightly tested industry, co-opting a consumers' organization that enjoys high public credibility; indeed, even using our money to fund the industry's self-serving propaganda.