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Let's reap the bounty of agricultural biotechnology

By Bill Pauli, July 20, 2005

They say farmers get pretty set in their ways, and in a line of work where tradition and routine are common, that's probably true. Some things about farming don't change – working with soil, planting with the seasons, reaping during harvest.

But while the fundamentals of farming are well known, the actual practice of growing and ranching in California has undergone much change and innovation. We are among the most progressive farmers in the United States, and we play a vital role in providing safe and healthy food throughout the world. That's why I can't understand all the misinformation associated with biotechnology, an established practice of modern farming that makes our food more plentiful, longer-lasting and, yes, healthier than ever.

Since it was introduced to U.S. markets in 1996, not a single person or animal has become sick from eating biotech foods or feeds. Additionally:

▶ All biotech crops on the marketplace today have been thoroughly reviewed by the Environmental Protection Agency, the U.S. Department of Agriculture and the Food and Drug Administration. They have been approved only on a case-by-case basis.

▶ The American Medical Association has stated that biotech plants have the potential to improve nutrition and prevent and cure disease, and the World Health Organization concludes that biotech crops can help developing nations overcome food scarcity problems.

▶ A 2004 report from the National

Academy of Sciences concluded that foods from biotech crops are as safe as any other foods in your supermarket.

In a recent survey, Californians told us they think it's important for the state's family farmers and ranchers to stay in business. To do that, we must take advantage of the latest innovations, such as biotechnology. By saving on crop-production materials such as water and fuel, we can continue to offer what Californians tell us they value so much: safe food, open space, jobs and a wonderful, sustaining environment for wildlife.

I understand that some are unsure of biotechnology, and many concerns have been addressed to the farming community in a thoughtful way that has produced a sound dialogue and increased understanding. Others, however, use scare tactics in an effort to ban biotechnology and deny everyone the benefits of the best science and the most extensive research in the world today.

These political activists hope to pass a measure in Sonoma County in November and to qualify county ballot measures to ban proven biotech crops in several other regions, including Alameda (\$37.3 million in agricultural production) and Contra Costa (\$108.6 million) counties. This would be an economic disaster for California, the leading U.S. agricultural state for more than 50 years.

Despite California's agricultural heritage, its future is uncertain. Every year, California loses more than 100,000 acres of farmland to urban growth. To produce more food on less farmland, today's farmer must have access to innovative farming practices to



MIKE KAPKA / The Chronicle 2005
Endangered? Farmers are being squeezed by the need to yield more with less, such as this increasingly shrinking farmland near Brentwood.

continue feeding America.

There is no justification for restricting the family farmers' ability to utilize the kind of breakthroughs and ingenuity we celebrate in every other facet of life. In a world of camera phones, Palm Pilots and Blackberries, why should farmers be made to use the outdated equivalents of rotary phones, 8-track tapes and carbon paper?

I believe when the facts are known about biotech crops, consumers will support the innovations of today and embrace their promise. They will do this after considering an important reality that's true of every family farm I know: Before any crop from our fields, whether traditional or biotech grown, arrives on your table, it first gets served on ours. That's why farmers have every incentive to grow and produce the best – and the safest – food in the world.

Bill Pauli is president of the California Farm Bureau Federation (www.cfbf.com), a statewide organization of nearly 89,000 family farmers. For more information, visit the federation's Web site on agricultural biotechnology, www.feedingthefuture.org.