

Consumers warm up to biotechnology

By Sean Pratt
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Canadians are becoming more accepting of biotechnology, according to a recent poll.

A Nanos Research survey of 1,001 people conducted in mid-August shows 66 percent, or two out of every three, had a positive or very positive impression of biotechnology. A few years ago the comfort level was in the 40 percent range.

"We're starting to see a shift," said Janice Tranberg of the Council for Biotechnology Information Canada.

Similar surveys conducted in Asia show 73 percent of consumers in the Philippines believe biotechnology will bring benefits to them or their family in the next five years, followed by India at 70 percent and China at 55 percent.

Japanese consumers are still reluctant to embrace the technology, with 71 percent saying they are unsure about the future potential of biotech food.

Even in Europe, where the traditional 60-40 split in public opinion against biotechnology remains, there are signs that at least when it comes to actual buying habits there is some softening in consumer attitudes.

A survey of 10 European countries shows that nearly half those who bought GM-labelled food are people who said they would not buy such products.

"Even though they say they don't want GMOs, they're buying them," said Tranberg.

Stewart Wells, president of the National Farmers Union, doesn't put much faith in the industry-sponsored polls.

"When you've got as much money as those people have, you can produce

a survey that says anything you want," he said.

But biotech proponents said there are several reasons for the attitudinal shifts showing up in their surveys, first and foremost being the attention GM crops have received as one solution to the mounting food security crisis, with the tipping point happening shortly after the United Nation's High Level Conference on World Food Security in June.

"I've never seen so many positive biotech stories in my life. This has been quite an interesting year," said Jill Maase, vice-president of plant biotechnology with CropLife Canada.

The attitudinal shift is not just showing up in survey results and newspaper articles.

Tranberg said GM crop developers recently met with the Ontario Wheat Producers' Marketing Board. A group that in the past wanted nothing to do with GM wheat was willing to provide a list of traits it would like to see developed.

"That was kind of a pleasant surprise to have that response," she said.

Maase said the Canadian Institute for Environmental Law and Policy, which has not been a friend of biotechnology, is working with CropLife Canada on a sustainability project.

"We're seeing an opportunity to have that conversation, which wasn't available to us previously. That's a different experience from our standpoint."

The industry feels it has a good sto-

ry to tell for those willing to listen.

There are a number of consumer-based traits in the biotech pipeline, including a rice variety that will help address vitamin A deficiencies in developing countries, lettuce and carrots with higher calcium levels and allergy-free peanuts.

Field testing is well underway on drought-tolerant corn, soybeans, canola and other crops, with commercialization expected to start as early as 2010. Work is also being done on salt tolerance and nitrogen efficiency.

All those traits are aimed at improving crop yield and minimizing inputs, which the industry says will help address food security and environmental concerns.

The industry is also defending itself against accusations that it is squeezing producer margins,

especially those in developing countries, with its growing control over seed supply.

A 2007 survey conducted by the International Service for the Acquisition for Agri-biotech Applications shows that of the 23 countries around the world growing GM crops, 12 are developing nations and 11 million of the 12 million farmers planting GM crops are resource-poor farmers.

"It demonstrates those farmers see value in the technology," said Tranberg.

She also noted that companies like Canada's Performance Plants have donated their intellectual property for humanitarian purposes.

BIOTECHNOLOGY

