Fixation on GM Foods Dangerous in the Long Run

By Peter Taylor

Cheerios, that innocuously bland finger food beloved by toddlers, has found itself in the midst of a spicy, adult-sized controversy.

Recently, General Mills, the maker of Cheerios, announced it will soon label its circular oat-based cereal as "not made with genetically modified ingredients."

Such a move is a major concession to food activists who've convinced themselves there's something unhealthy or dangerous about modern plant science. It can also be seen as yet more evidence of the superstitious, illogical, unscientific attitude so prevalent in food policy these days.

It's worth noting there are no genetically modified oats in existence, which renders Cheerios' claim largely moot. Aside from a tiny amount of sugar and corn starch, nothing has been changed except the printing on the box.

There's also no reliable scientific evidence to suggest genetic modification creates any health risk that would require labelling. In fact, modifications to improve crop resistance to drought or allow for more efficient pesticide use have been responsible for massive increases in yields, to the great benefit of farmers, consumers and the world's hungry.

In 2012, French professor and anti-genetic modification activist Gilles-Eric Seralini claimed to have proven genetically modified corn caused cancer in rats after a two-year long study. The results created an international sensation ... until more credible scientists pointed out the rats he used are well-known to develop cancer after two years regardless of what they eat.

The journal that published Seralini's study formally retracted his conclusions this month. (The same issue, by the way, contains a study proving genetically modified rice does not cause cancer in rats.)

While General Mills claims it's only responding to consumer demand, the move adds to the mythology there's something undesirable about genetically modified ingredients.

This may prove very damaging for the company. Most of General Mills' other products (including Honey-Nut Cheerios) will never be free from genetic modifications. What good does it serve to convince consumers that regular Cheerios are somehow healthier than all their other products?

Of course, panic over genetically modified foods is just one example of the medieval attitude many people have adopted with respect to food these days.

Consider Ontario Premier (and provincial agriculture minister) Kathleen Wynne's recent Local Food Act. This puzzling piece of legislation was supported by all parties and approved with unanimous consent in November.

Beyond meaningless gestures such as setting up a Local Food Week and improving "food literacy," the act gives the province the power to force local food targets on public institutions, including hospitals, school boards, nursing homes and universities. These organizations must then report on what they're doing to meet these goals.

As if hospitals don't have enough to worry about, now the government expects them to track the provenance of every apple slice they put on patients' trays. It's bureaucratic madness.

Beyond the nuisance factor, however, the act could also prove to be profoundly damaging to the provincial economy.

There is nothing holy about local food. It is no more or less nutritious than any other food. In a great many cases, it's environmentally preferable to grow food in places that enjoy a large comparative advantage (strawberries in California, for example) and transport it to other markets, as opposed to growing everything locally. Besides, if local food was actually cheaper or more desirable than the imported variety, there'd be no need for governments to set targets or demand reports in the first place.

Wynne's new policy will inevitably require a transfer in wealth from local taxpayers to local farmers as more expensive
local food is forced down our throats. Why is this a good idea? (And if it is, how about a Local News Act that forces citizens to read hard-working local columnists, rather than getting all their opinions from nasty "imported" journalists?)

However, the biggest problem with the province’s local food fetish may lie in its long-term consequences; just as the new Cheerios labels could imperil General Mills’ future profitability.

"Ontario is experiencing a big increase in food exports," says Brady Deaton, a professor at the University of Guelph’s department of food, agriculture and resource economics.

The value of provincial exports has risen nearly 30 per cent over the past 10 years. And the federal government is currently involved in several important international trade negotiations with the goal of boosting this further.

Government promotion of local food, on the other hand, deliberately discourages trade. And this can have real world consequences.

"If the local food act proves to be substantive," says Deaton, "you could expect some blowback from our trading partners."

Local food legislation in every jurisdiction will inevitably mean fewer exports for Ontario producers.

If you were a farmer, would you rather be limited to sales in your home province, or have the entire world as your market place?

(It bears mention that covert anti-trade policies like this are becoming a worrisome component of the Ontario Liberal platform. Recall earlier efforts to make it more difficult for foreign firms to win procurement contracts in this province through clauses demanding something called "local knowledge.")

Everyone wants to eat healthier these days. Let’s start by getting rid of all the politics and ideological craziness infesting our food supply.

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