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Biotecnology is arguably one of, if not the most significant scientific development to impact the food system. Yet after almost a decade, the new biotech production practices, foods containing genetically modified ingredients, and policies shaping food production and purchases continue to be hotly debated around the world.

The opportunities created by this technology, as well as the concerns,

Bankers Can Help Generate Greater Understanding About Biotech Foods

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by:

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must be reconciled if the consuming public is to be comfortable with the quality and safety of the food system. Moving the deliberation forward with factual, science-based knowledge is critical to the future of every stakeholder in the food chain — from producer all the way through to consumer.

While food producers and biotech companies are currently seeing the greatest benefits from the new tools of biotechnology, the potential to enhance food traits has long-term implications for consumers locally and around the world.

To promote informed discussion, Farm Foundation has published *The New Science of Food: Facing Up to Our Biotechnology Choices*. Written by Mark Edelman of Iowa State University and Dave Patton of The Ohio State University, the booklet does not promote or oppose biotechnology. Rather, it presents a framework for use in public discussions about the use of biotechnology

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in our food system. Such discussions are critical for the development of informed decisions that can sustain a stable policy environment for all stakeholders in the food system.

Edelman and Patton outline three approaches for addressing the use of biotechnology in our agriculture and food system. The first emphasizes science and business enterprise; the second, public health and environmental safety; and the third, information and flexibility for adjustment.

The New Science of Food organizes a wide variety of perspectives in a way that helps people learn about the issue and the views of others. The authors began by working with a diverse group of citizens to identify concerns and build a framework of alternative responses. After collecting and verifying information from a variety of sources — including scientists, agriculture, food companies, health, environment, media and people representing diverse views — the comments and viewpoints were categorized into the framework of the three approaches.

This project is very much in keeping with the philosophy of Farm Foundation. We are a catalyst, linking diverse stakeholders in efforts to build information for the public policy process.

Farm Foundation has a 70-year history of objectivity; we do not lobby or advocate specific positions. We promote informed dialogue on public issues and policies, striving to build knowledge-based networks for U.S. agriculture and rural people. We represent no one commodity or geographic area; rather, we address the broad issues that have significant impacts on the economic well-being of the nation's agriculture and food system. (To learn more about the numerous projects in which we are involved, visit our website at www.farmfoundation.org.)

The New Science of Food is an opportunity for bankers to promote greater understanding about an issue of importance to agriculture and the food system. Here are some ways you can use the book in your community:

- Provide *The New Science of Food* as an educational resource to 4-H club leadership or local educators in agriculture, foods and nutrition, government or social studies. (Information on *The New Science of Food* was presented at the National Association of County Agricultural Agents annual meeting in July, so many Extension staff will be aware of this resource.)

- Distribute the book to selected bank customers involved in the food system, such as biotech, conventional, organic and/or natural food producers, agribusiness, food processing, grocery stores, restaurants, business clubs and civic organizations.

- Host a public forum to allow community citizens to deliberate the issue.

Sponsoring a forum may take some work. The first step may be to organize a hosting committee that includes a diverse set of food system interests. This committee will need to identify a moderator who can manage the discussion without directing the opinions. Extension networks can help, as well as Kettering Foundation's National Issues Forums (NIF), with which Farm Foundation collaborated on this project.

NIF produces tools to help civic and educational groups host public discussions on topics of national importance. The goal is to help identify common ground among diverse interests. In 1999, Farm Foundation and NIF collaborated on a similar project dealing with urban sprawl and land-use policy.

In some regions, forums are being used to help open up communi-

cation among biotech, conventional and organic farmers in order to identify ideas for best management practices. At the same time, many consumers want more information as they consider their own preferences for food purchases and policy.

The New Science of Food also is part of an experiment with an Internet-based public deliberation forum. The forum group will include 20 college students and others representing diverse interests from across the country.

Whether live or virtual, a forum will generate a wide expression of viewpoints. Deliberation enhances — rather than diminishes — the overall educational importance of a forum. Public discussion helps participants better understand the issues and gain insights into the views of others.

Sponsoring a few educational opportunities locally can add up to an immense impact on the food system nationally and internationally.

For more information about the online forum, hosting a forum or ordering copies of *The New Science of Food*, visit the NIF website at www.nifi.org or call 800-433-7834. A moderator guide is available free of charge.