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FROM IOWA TO BANGLADESH, TECHNOLOGY SHAPING THE FUTURE OF AGRICULTURE

By

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December 10, 2014 - I grew up on a dairy farm in Iowa and spent my formative years milking cows, slopping hogs and helping Dad grow and harvest our maize, oats and alfalfa crops. Although Dad had little formal education, he was a progressive farmer, always open to new ideas on how to farm better. Thanks to Dad, I am a farmer-at-heart, and, like him, I am always eager to learn about new ideas for feeding the world, safely.

So when I learned that Bangladesh had approved genetically engineered eggplant—better known as Bt brinjal—I was intrigued. I had learned from firsthand experience in America that biotechnology could protect farmers, consumers and the environment by dramatically reducing the use of harmful chemicals.

Whenever I am back in Iowa, I bicycle to the farm where I was born and raised. About a decade ago, on one of those bicycle trips, I noticed something different. An avid bird watcher, I was surprised to see birds along the road that I had never seen there before.

I stopped my ride and chatted with an old neighbor Cy Leahy, and told him about the birds. Cy laughed and said not only had birds come back, but wild turkeys, deer, bald eagles, beavers, coyotes and other animals, none of which I had ever seen on our farm in the 18 years I lived there.

Curious about this resurgence of wildlife, I called our county agricultural extension agent, and he told me that farmers' use of genetically engineered soybeans had slashed the use of pesticides on that crop from six to seven sprays a season to zero. As a result, the agent explained, within only a few years wildlife that had disappeared many decades earlier had returned in ever growing numbers.

I was amazed how the introduction of this new soybean seed could have such a positive impact on both cutting the cost of production (by eliminating the use of pesticides and the fuel needed to apply the pesticide) and enhancing the environment ... all dramatic changes that I had seen with my own eyes.

The Bangladesh Angle

Having seen the positive impact of genetically engineered crops in Iowa, I was eager to learn more about Bangladesh's experience with such crops, specifically Bt brinjal. So, a couple of weeks ago I went to Pabna District to talk with a farmer who was among the twenty selected last growing season to try the new genetically engineered brinjal.

... and what a story he had! He told me (and government agricultural agents confirmed) that farmers using conventional brinjal often spray their crop with a powerful pesticide 80-100 times (!) a season in an often futile effort to control the fruit-and-shoot borer that lives inside the fruit. As explained to me, some of this pesticide actually penetrates into the meat of the fruit itself, which means that we the consumers actually end up eating it. However, the farmer who used Bt brinjal did not spray his crop even once for the borer, as he had no infestation from that pest, which can destroy as much as 70% of a conventional brinjal crop. He did use a topical pesticide two or three times to control leaf hoppers. He was pleased with his crop, which was much larger as he did not lose anything to the borer and which he produced at lower cost by slashing the cost of pesticides. He said he and his family ate and enjoyed his brinjal crop. Of course, the benefit to both the environment and consumer in avoiding the pesticides is incalculable. I was so impressed.

I share these vignettes to encourage further exploration and development of genetically engineered seeds to enable a growing world to produce more food, while using less land, less water, less fertilizer and fewer pesticides. I believe that we need to combine the best proven agricultural practices with the best science and technology. Biotechnology is a tool that can reduce poverty and hunger by enabling farmers to grow crops that are resistant to insects, drought and disease.

I applaud the Government of Bangladesh in giving farmers the option to produce brinjal at less cost both financially and to the environment. I am pleased that Bangladeshi farmers now have an option to use biotechnology to boost agriculture productivity while providing consumers safer food products ... helping the environment by reducing the run off of chemicals into streams, ponds and rivers, which poison fish, shrimp and other animals such as birds, bees, and livestock.

That is what Cy Leahy saw happen in Iowa a decade ago; that is what could happen in Bangladesh.

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