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Survey suggests most Americans would accept 'sustainable' GM wheat

By Caroline Scott-Thomas, 03-Jun-2010

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Many American consumers would be receptive to foods containing genetically modified wheat if it is produced sustainably, suggests a new survey examining attitudes to food technologies from the International Food Information Council (IFIC).

The survey, the fourteenth conducted by the council, polled 750 US adults to gauge current attitudes toward the newest food technologies.

Although commercially available genetically modified (GM) wheat crops are likely to be at least a decade away, 80 percent of survey respondents said they would be likely to purchase bread, crackers, cookies, cereal, or pasta products containing GM wheat "if they were produced using sustainable practices to feed more people using fewer resources such as land and pesticides." And consistent with the 2008 survey, 77 percent of respondents said they would buy foods produced through biotechnology if they helped cut pesticide use.

IFIC said that these results suggested there would be "a receptive audience" to products containing GM wheat if or when they become commercially available.

Sustainability awareness rises

The survey also found that when the production of genetically modified (GM) foods is framed in such a way as to promote sustainable practices, consumers are more open to including them in their diets.

Half of consumers said they had heard or read at least "a little" about the concept of sustainability in food production, an increase from 2008, when that figure was at 41 percent. In 2007, only 30 percent said they had heard or read anything about sustainability in food production.

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IFIC's interim vice president, Nutrition and Food Safety, Marianne Smith Edge said: "These results suggest that the importance of the impact of food production on the environment is here to stay for consumers. Over the last several years we've seen the overall awareness of sustainability and environmental issues continue to grow."

Lack of information

But the survey suggested that lack of information on biotechnology is still considered a reason to be skeptical about the technology. Of those who said they were unfavorable or neutral toward animal biotechnology, 55 percent said the reason was that they didn't have enough information about the subject, while 39 percent said they didn't understand the benefits of using biotechnology with animals.

As for GM wheat, prominent North American wheat industry organizations, including the National Wheat Growers Association, US Wheat Associates, the North American Millers' Association and the Independent Bakers Association, have said that there is a competitiveness problem for the wheat industry. They claim that the differential between net returns for wheat and other crops is growing and production will continue to decline unless biotechnology is used to improve wheat's competitiveness.

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