

GENETICALLY MODIFIED ORGANISMS IN THE FOOD SUPPLY

Social Policy Resolution
CC04.11.57



Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
God's work. Our hands.

Adopted by the 2004 Church Council.

Whereas

Context and call

Since the 1980s, the application of the technology that makes possible genetically modified organisms (GMOs) and the economic and political policies used to deliver that technology have become a center of controversy. This biotechnology bears the potential both for substantial good and permanent harm. The manipulation of genetic material (DNA) in seeds, for instance, has sometimes prevented crop disaster or increased crop productivity, reduced chemical input, and lowered production costs. At the same time, the use of GMOs has led to disputes about food safety, food security, food sovereignty, economic development, trade implications, and ecological integrity.

This discord in settings as diverse as farm homes, corporate boardrooms, and international organizations is understandable, since GMOs and their delivery alter basics of life such as food quality or affect age-old practices like saving seed for planting. Despite the controversy, it seems clear that GMO research and its application will continue for the near future. We of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America (ELCA) as individual members and as a corporate body are called to responsible deliberation and action when such weighty social and ecological issues are at stake (CS:LP, p.3). (See Addendum for explanation of citations.)

Definition and scope

Genetically modified organisms refer to microbes, plants, and non-human animals that have been manipulated at the genetic level by means of biotechnology (recombinant DNA technology).[2] The scope of this social policy resolution is limited primarily to GMOs in the human food supply since most of the current controversy about GMOs is located there.[3]

Inconclusive and complex

Evidence from the physical and social sciences does not settle the question of how harmful or beneficial GMOs are. The following points may illustrate the extent of the complex character of GMO evaluation:

Some individuals and organizations hold that GMOs simply extend the ages-old manipulation of nature as represented by the traditional breeding of species. Others point out that GMOs represent unprecedented manipulation by enabling novel combinations of genetic material across the boundaries of species or kingdoms.

Some individuals and organizations question whether GMOs have been sufficiently tested for their effect on human health or the environment. They question whether the use of GMOs for responsible and socially just outcomes can be ensured, especially in countries without a developed infrastructure or regulatory practice. Other individuals and organizations attest to the benefits of GMOs evidenced in cases of improved crops, land conservation, increased food supply, economic returns, and heightened human productivity. They point to a lack of evidence about harmful effects despite a decade of widespread GMO use in the United States and Canada and claim that GMOs are simply a "substantial equivalent" to traditional food products and, thus, do not require special testing.[4]

In a situation of such complexity, it is understandable that perspectives will differ dramatically and passionately even among individuals who are united by the work and person of Christ and who share genuine concern for the common good. Because GMOs are a sufficiently broad matter, individual cases need to be evaluated with multiple criteria for their impact on the food supply, social systems, and environment.

Decisions necessary

In the face of this complexity, decisions on matters of policy and practice are both difficult and necessary. As the future use of GMOs is determined, ELCA members seek guidance for decisions they make as citizens, consumers, and professionals. Churchwide staff needs to be able to draw upon clearly established ELCA social policy for advocacy work. The following should guide such deliberation and decision.

Central themes

The following are central themes from the ELCA social statements on economic life and caring for creation that shape the general framework for deliberation and assessment.[5] (The ordering here presumes no priority.)

- **Sufficient**
Sufficiency means that we assess economic activities in terms of how they provide "adequate access to income and other resources that enable people to meet their basic needs, including nutrition, personal development, and participation in community with dignity" (SSLA p. 10.4). This includes attention to justice and human dignity in all economic policy and practice (SSLA p. 9.4&5). Sufficiency means, as well, that we seek to meet the basic needs of all creation by stewarding arable land and changing patterns of acquisition and consumption (CC p. 7.3-5).
- **Sustainable**
Sustainability means that we support practices to protect and enhance the capacity of natural and social systems to survive and thrive together over the long term, including respect of environmental limits. Sustainability means, as well, "providing for an acceptable quality of life for present generations without compromising resources for future generations." This entails the

protection of species and the fostering of behavior consistent with long-term sustainability (CC p. 8.3).

- **Livelihood**
"Livelihood" designates here the means of subsistence, including the economic arrangements and infrastructures necessary for supporting it (SSLA p. 7.3). As stewards of this gift of livelihood, we are to support practices that use available resources to generate jobs and the creation of capital for growth required to meet basic needs so that lives may be lived beneficially and productively (SSLA p. 8.4).
- **For all**
"For all" means that economic activities should be assessed in terms of how they affect "all people," especially those living in poverty (SSLA p. 4.3).
- **Stewardship**
Stewardship means that all our efforts serve the best interests of creation's integrity in imitation of God's care for us (CC p. 3.2).
- **Justice**
Justice for the relationships within creation means "honoring the integrity of creation, and striving for fairness within the human family" (CC p. 6.2). It entails honoring the principles of participation, solidarity, sufficiency, and sustainability. Participation requires that all living things "are entitled to be heard and to have their interests considered when decisions are made" (CC p. 6.4) with a special hearing from those who work closest to the land and living things (CC p. 6.5). The principle of participation entails, as well, that "we are to participate actively in decisions that impact our lives" (SSLA p. 9.6). Solidarity requires that human beings stand together in interdependence to act locally and globally on behalf of creation (CC p. 6.9). (For more on sufficiency and sustainability, see above.)

Relevant values

The following are values derived from ELCA social policy relevant to the GMO conversation.

The good of science and technology

ELCA policy recognizes the value of scientific research and technological developments (CC p. 3.4). The human capacity for genetic manipulation should be understood, in principle, as one of God's gifts in the created order to be pursued for the good of all. As with any such gift, it must be used responsibly and tested for its contribution to justice and stewardship.

Human needs and justice

ELCA policy recognizes the need to assess the development of GMOs and their delivery according to the impact on human needs and social justice. The assessment

must consider, for instance, whether GMOs and the practices associated with them increase the availability and equitable distribution of food for people who are hungry in the short term and ability of people to feed themselves in the long term. The assessment must also consider the public good that GMOs should enhance and not take into account only the private gain they may offer. (SSLA p. 5.1) This requires scrutiny according to "how specific policies and practices affect people and nations that are the poorest" (SSLA p. 5.1).

Humility and the future

ELCA policy recognizes a need for special considerations and caution^[6] with regard to GMOs. The reasons are several. The use of GMOs may affect the integrity and limits of the earth. (CC p. 2.6). Food — including its production and delivery — as a basic need of life cannot simply be left to the decisions of the market (SSLA p. 5.2). In the face of the uncertainties involved with GMOs, solidarity with creation means that humility and wisdom must mark human action (CC p. 7.8). All of this warrants a cautious approach.

Regulation and the common good

ELCA policy recognizes the need for judicious government regulation when it is necessary to protect the needs of individuals and communities or to promote the common good (SSLA p. 10.3.2). The goal of such careful and comprehensive regulation seeks both to protect from any potential harm of GMOs and their delivery and to advance the potential good.

Resolved

Directives for deliberation and action

To direct ELCA advocacy, corporate social responsibility, and other staff, as needed, to evaluate matters related to GMOs according to whether and what degree the policy or action is consistent with the central themes and relevant values stated above. This applies to all questions involving legislative action, trade policies, patent laws, hunger relief and development measures, shareholder actions, and policy proposals. This evaluation should be done in light of the following specific considerations that follow from ELCA social policy.

1. What effect is the policy or practice likely to have on the alleviation of hunger at the household and community level in a just and beneficial way? Economic, trade, or political policies and practices should be evaluated in terms of direct, indirect, short-term, and long-term effects in this regard (SSLA p. 12.2.1).
2. What is the effect of the economic practice on the well being of the environment and human beings in terms of its direct, indirect, short-term, and long-term outcome? Special consideration should be given to the likely effect on people who are poor or otherwise disadvantaged to increase their access to goods, services, and self-sufficiency (SSLA p. 4.1.3 and p. 6.5.1).

3. What effect is the policy or practice likely to have on the participation of consumers or beneficiaries to make free and informed decisions? Does it provide them information and put into their hands the power to influence decisions that affect their work, freedom, and dignity (SSLA p. 9.6)? This entails participation in an independent and reasoned evaluation of GMOs' benefits and risks.
4. What effect is the policy or practice likely to have on family farmers in the United States and abroad? Does it support their livelihood by protecting family farms, indigenous resources, the land, and the small communities they make possible ("Family Farms" assembly action, adopted by the Churchwide Assembly in 1995)?
5. What effect is the policy or practice likely to have on individual farmers and commercial enterprises to produce goods and services? This entails a special concern for outcomes that are socially just and ecologically sustainable (CC p. 8.3).
6. What effect is the policy or practice likely to have on protecting indigenous species in their variety (biodiversity) and their habitat (CC p. 8.1)?
7. What effect is the policy or practice likely to have toward increasing or decreasing reliance on methods that have demonstrated harm to the environment, such as significant reduction in the variety of life, pesticide resistance, and depletion of non-renewable resources (CC p. 4.3&4.4)?
8. What effect is the policy or practice likely to have on the mutual thriving of the natural and social system over the long term, including the reversal of current environmental degradation (SSLA p. 14.2)?
9. What effect does the policy or practice have on the health of humans who consume GMOs? This entails support and even encouragement of efforts to provide studies to determine the effects. If there is strong evidence that the effects are harmful to health, then production of such a GMO should be reconsidered (Caring for Health: Our Shared Endeavor p. 1.1).

To direct ELCA advocacy, corporate social responsibility, and other staff to consult with relevant individuals and organizations who can articulate the interests and perspectives of farmers, corporations, activists, governments, people who are poor, scientists, non-governmental organizations, and consumers in the United States and in other countries.

To direct the Division for Church in Society to publicize the availability of this social policy resolution and other resources, present or future, to assist members in their consideration of the complex and significant questions involving GMOs.[7]

Addendum

For this document, the following reference procedure applies.

Social statement abbreviations

(Other references to ELCA documents are spelled out)

CS:LP The Church in Society: A Lutheran Perspective, adopted at the second biennial Churchwide Assembly, August 28-September 4, 1991.

CC Caring for Creation: Vision, Hope, and Justice, adopted by the third Churchwide Assembly on August 28, 1993.

SSLA Sufficient, Sustainable Livelihood for All, adopted by the sixth Churchwide Assembly on August 20, 1999.

PP Policies and Procedures of the ELCA for Addressing Social Concerns, adopted by the first Churchwide Assembly on August 28, 1989.

Examples

"p. 3" references an idea found on page 3.

"p. 3.1" references an idea or phrase on page 3 in the 1st paragraph — paragraphs are counted whether they begin or conclude on the page.

"p. 3.1.1" references a particular bullet of a paragraph on page 3 — a paragraph that includes bullets counts as single paragraph and each bullet as a sub-point under it.

Endnotes

1. "Social policy resolutions refer to actions, other than social statements, of the Churchwide Assembly or Church Council on matters of social concern" (PP p.17.3). A resolution such as this is directed immediately toward ELCA staff as they carry out policy and actions consistent with church social statements. This document, however, is also intended to inform the deliberation of individual members as they reflect and act on these questions in their lives as citizens, income earners, and consumers.

2. This manipulation occurs through directly adding, subtracting, substituting, activating, or eliminating genetic material.

3. Although directed to food supply questions, elements of this social policy resolution, when directly relevant, could be employed to evaluate other instances of biotechnology. Examples of such questions would include biotechnology as it is increasingly applied to a host of possible products such as genetically modified (GM) insects, medical products, chemical polymers, textile fibers, and so forth. The issues around medical genetics for human beings, sometimes included under the term biotechnology are not in any way under consideration here.

4. The term "substantial equivalence" is a designation of the United States Department of Agriculture indicating a judgment that a new product is not substantially different from a comparable traditional product.

5. "...social policy resolutions shall rely upon or be consistent with the teachings and

policy of social statements" (PP p. 17.3). See Policies and Procedures of the ELCA for Addressing Social Concerns for elaboration of the procedures and policies governing social policy resolutions. The two social statements primarily involved are Sufficient, Sustainable Livelihood for All and Caring for Creation: Vision, Hope, and Justice. See the addendum for the reference procedure. All ELCA social statements are available online at www.elca.org/socialstatements. Single printed copies may be ordered free at 1.800.638.2522 ext. 2996. Multiple copies may be ordered for a small fee from 800-638-3522.

6. The so-called "Precautionary Principle" is sometimes applied to GMOs. While there is not a settled definition of this principle, one common understanding is the "Wingspread Definition," named after a 1998 international conference. It reads: "When an activity raises threats of harm to human health or the environment, precautionary measures should be taken even if some cause and effect relationships are not fully established scientifically. In this context the proponent of an activity, rather than the public, should bear the burden of proof." That conference laid out four elements of implementation:

1. duty to take anticipatory action to prevent harm.
2. burden of proof for new technologies, processes, and so forth lies with proponents rather than the public.
3. proponents have an obligation to examine a full range of alternatives before starting a new activity.
4. decisions applying the Precautionary Principle must be open, and democratic and include affected parties.

The ELCA social statements do not use the term nor address directly all of its key elements. While the social statements have a "cautionary" tone grounded in responsibility for the care of creation and for justice, they do not address the Precautionary Principle's elements of burden of proof and obligation to examine a full range of alternatives.

The Church in Society resource *Genetics!: Where Do We Stand As Christians* is available online or may be ordered at 1.800.638.2522 ext. 2996. Several chapters are related to these questions and one chapter is devoted solely to GMOs.