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Advocates of GMOs go on the offensive

Food bioengineering has advantages, man says

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Bioengineered crops might have their drawbacks, but they are not the villains they're made out to be, says a plant molecular biologist from UCLA who recently spoke locally.

Bob Goldberg, a UCLA professor and member of the National Academy of Sciences, said during a speakers series presentation at the Calabasas Library that genetically modified organisms will be indispensable in feeding a growing population on limited land.

Goldberg offered a science-based perspective on genetically altered crops in a Feb. 19 talk in Founders Hall. He said genetically modified organisms, also known as GMOs, are no different from plants that farmers have been selectively breeding for centuries. But GMO gene alteration helps make plants more resistant to insects, herbicide and drought.

"Now we can change any gene in any organism very precisely," Goldberg said. "With this technology we can grow corn, we can grow cotton with basically no insecticide."

More than 100 people attended the presentation titled "Seeds of Hope: Genetics and the Future of Agriculture."

Goldberg said the technology is more than 40 years old and has been used to create new varieties of corn, soybeans and barley.

Deena Parry is an Oak Park resident who headed the local effort supporting a 2012 California proposition to require labels on food products containing genetically modified organisms. While the proposition failed, Parry continues the fight against GMOs.

"These (GMO) foods have no long term health safety studies," Parry said.

But Goldberg said there is no evidence to suggest GMOs pose health risks.



He said that genetic modification of foods is among the breakthroughs that have contributed to increased food yields and stable food prices in the U.S. over the past century.

In the early 1900s, 1 acre produced 30 bushels of corn but can now produce 185 bushels, he said; crop yields in America have rocketed and the quality of food has contributed to a longer and better life for consumers.

Goldberg said that as more land is lost to development and climate change, farmers need to be able to grow higher yielding crops in a sustainable manner.

“Loss of farmland is happening all over the world,” he said. “We have to do a lot more with a lot less.”

Goldberg said GMOs can safely increase the yields and nutritional composition of major crops.

But critics of the technology want to ban bioengineered crops out of concern for the safety of the food supply.

“This has been one of the most depressing things that I’ve ever gone through in my entire professional career. Those of us who are doing these things aren’t doing it to harm people. It’s quite the opposite actually,” Goldberg said.

Calabasas resident Ed Albrecht said Goldberg’s presentation helped to clarify the truths and myths of GMO research.

“He made very strong arguments to silence all the critics, . . .” Albrecht said. “Most important, there hasn’t been one reported illness from a GMO product. It was an enlightening evening of learning,” he said.

The speakers series will conclude March 11 with a presentation by former L.A. County District Attorney Gil Garcetti, “The Elusive Nature of Beauty—From D.A. to Photographer.”

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