

The Impetus for a Symposium on Herbicide-Resistant Crops

Proceedings of a Symposium of the Weed Science Society of America on
February 6, 1991, at Louisville, Kentucky

PREFACE

The national Biotechnology Working Group, representing a number of pro-environmental citizen organizations, came together because of their mutual concern over the research output of biotechnology. They publicized their objections to the development of herbicide-resistant crops by releasing their report entitled, "Biotechnology's Bitter Harvest: Herbicide-Tolerant Crops and the Threat to Sustainable Agriculture" during three press conferences for legislatures March 19, 1990, in Washington, D.C.; Davis, CA; and St. Paul, MN. The group indicated that citizen activists concerned with environmental affairs had initially supported increased funding of biotechnology because biotech spokespersons had promised that "...with new genetically engineered crops and biopesticides to control pests... chemical pesticides would no longer be needed." The Biotechnology Working Group noted that some of the first commercial products of agricultural biotechnology were herbicide-resistant crops and thus they stated that "...the direction of agricultural biotechnology is clear: the first major products will not be used to end dependence on toxic chemicals in agriculture. Rather, they will further entrench and extend the pesticide era."

Many of us involved with various aspects of weed science and herbicide-resistant crop research do not view the development of herbicide-resistant crops as necessarily anti-environmental. In fact, herbicide-resistant crops could enable producers to use less herbicide and it should reduce markedly the use of certain herbicides that are persistent in the environment. Clearly a dialogue between representatives of each side of the issue was needed to advance mutual understanding of

the technology by all concerned. This dialogue could best be accomplished if representatives of all the players involved with herbicide-resistant crops would meet to discuss the pros and cons of this technology. Thus, I initiated a request for a symposium entitled the "Development of Herbicide-Resistant Crop Cultivars" at the annual conference of the Weed Science Society of America in Louisville, Kentucky, on February 6, 1991. Eleven speakers representing their major areas of interest, ranging from ethical considerations to ultimate use of herbicide-resistant crops, discussed the pros and cons of this technology. The symposium had standing room only, and I have received numerous requests for the speaker's manuscripts which indicates the interest that there is in this subject.

These proceedings have been published to inform individuals about the advantages and disadvantages of herbicide-resistant crops from the vantage points of the various researchers and concerned citizens involved with agricultural biotechnology. An understanding of the relative risks and benefits of herbicide-resistant crops is required to make intelligent decisions regarding this technology. I hope that we can come to some consensus in our assessment of this technology rather than polarize our efforts and frustrate and confuse our legislators at the state and federal level who must deal with funding research, education, and regulation of agricultural biotechnology. We must join together in this worthwhile endeavor of keeping our agriculture productive and making sure it is profitable and competitive while protecting our environment and conserving our natural resources.

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CONTENTS

<i>Page</i>	
611	The Impetus for a Symposium on Herbicide-Resistant Crops. Orvin C. Burnside
613	Developing Herbicide-Tolerant Crop Cultivars: Introduction. Howard F. Harrison, Jr.
615	History of Identification of Herbicide-Resistant Weeds. Jodie S. Holt
621	Rationale for Developing Herbicide-Resistant Crops. Orvin C. Burnside
626	History of Herbicide-Tolerant Crops, Methods of Development, and Current State of the Art. Emphasis on Glyphosate Tolerance. G. M. Kishore, Stephen R. Padgett, and Robert T. Fraley
635	Concerns a Weed Scientist Might Have About Herbicide-Tolerant Crops. Steven R. Radosevich, Claudia M. Ghersa, and Gary Comstock
640	Concerns of Seed Company Officials with Herbicide-Tolerant Cultivars. Donald N. Duvick
647	Environmental Concerns with the Development of Herbicide-Tolerant Plants. Rebecca J. Goldberg
653	An Industry Perspective on Herbicide-Tolerant Crops. Robert T. Giaquinta
657	EPA's Response to Resistance Management and Herbicide-Tolerant Crop Issues. Diana M. Horne
662	Technology Transfer for Herbicide-Tolerant Weeds and Herbicide-Tolerant Crops. Ellery L. Knake
665	Future Impact of Crops with Modified Herbicide Resistance. Donald L. Wyse