## ROLE OF CONGRESS IN DEVELOPMENT, IMPLEMENTATION AND REGULATION OF NEW TECHNOLOGY The Honorable Henry Bonilla U.S. Congressman 23<sup>rd</sup> District, TX

## **Abstract**

Welcome to the Alamo City. I am sure you will find the hospitality as warm as the salsa, which you will find in almost every restaurant in San Antonio. I am positive that your visit to our city will be enjoyable. Years ago Will Rogers officially named San Antonio one of America's four most unique cities, along with San Francisco, New Orleans and Boston.

I want to give you a quick idea of what my congressional district is like and then also what the life of a member of the Appropriations Committee is like before I get into the heart of my remarks on Genetically Modified Organisms or GMOs and the federal government's role.

My Congressional District runs from here in San Antonio to Laredo located on the border, all the way up the border to El Paso and then across to Midland/Odessa. It is the largest Congressional district in Texas, it is larger than 29 states, spans 2 time zones and 3 climates. It encompasses <u>800 miles</u> of Texas/Mexico border. It is a very diverse region with some of the most beautiful parts of our state. There are 7 military installations in and around my district and some of the most impoverished communities of Texas are also in my area. This makes my responsibilities in Congress very diverse. I work on every thing from border patrol issues, to rural health care, to national military issues and agriculture. The agriculture production in the district is as diverse as the region itself.

More sheep and goats call this part of the state home than any other area in the country, there is also cattle production, corn and grain sorghum production as well as a variety of fruits and vegetables grown in this region. Livestock makes up 44 percent of the agriculture value in my district and crops make up 47 percent. There are four research and extension centers studying every thing from biotechnology and gene mapping to the more traditional issues such as risk management.

There are a couple of shrimp farms out in the desert and we even grow hydroponic tomatoes here. I think we grow everything in the district you might need to make up some very tasty salsa. There also is cotton production, both Pima and upland. In fact the only Pima production in Texas is in my district. In fact, you could put on your cotton dress shirt, your wool suit, leather boots, and sit down to dinner and everything you wear and eat could have been raised by the farmers and ranchers in the  $23^{rd}$  district.

I am fortunate to be able to represent them, and the entire state, as the only Texan, on the agriculture appropriations subcommittee. I also serve on the Defense and Labor, Health and Human Services subcommittees. This means that on any given day I could go from talking about the F16, to chronic diseases to the boll weevil eradication program, then back to a hearing on ergonomics and then to a briefing on troop readiness. You also have to keep the FSA, NRCS, ARS, and CSREES separate from HCFA, NIDDK, RBTI, USAF, and ATTACMS.

As you can see on any typical day I need to discuss 20 to 30 different topics. That is why it is imperative for you to always make your issues known. The Cotton Council is probably one of the best agriculture organizations I work with when it comes to keeping me informed of your priorities, issues and problems.

Through your diligent work I have come to fully recognize the importance of the cotton industry, to our national economy and to Texas. While I am sure you all know these numbers by heart, it is still impressive to hear them again. In 1997 the cotton industry generated \$40 billion in revenue. In 1998, the U.S. produced 13. 9 million bales and Texas produced about 4.5 million of that. The 1997 Texas crop was valued at \$1.58 billion. This is why COTTON IS KING.

My major responsibility as an appropriator is shaping the annual budget submitted by USDA. The budget submitted to us each year is about 6 inches thick. I also receive a stack of funding request letters every year from "interested parties" such as consumer groups, and industry groups, that is twice that size. Then after hours of hearings with the USDA and combing through stacks of request letters we start dividing up our \$13 billion pie. It is not an easy job. I am sure that if I asked any of you what your most important priority would be, you would say cotton; but if I were speaking to the corn growers I am quite certain I would get a very different answer. \$13 billion sounds like a lot of money but when you consider that two thirds of that money goes to feeding program that does not leave much money for agriculture. This includes the money dedicated to agriculture research. I believe that the future of agriculture is really dependent on research. As margins become tighter and tighter we have to look for ways to lower production costs, boost yields and reduce risk.

As I work to carefully evaluate all funding requests in research I look for projects that will provide the most bang for the buck. I believe I have found one such example in

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West Texas. I am very proud to support this effort. The new USDA-ARS Plant Stress and Water Conservation Lab located in Lubbock, Texas. The lab has formed a unique partnership with Texas Tech University and the Experiment Station located there. This three-way partnership allows them to focus precious resources and to have top scientists working together on projects. I hope that we will see more partnerships such as this formed across the country. The Plant Stress Lab should certainly be held up as an example. They have a modest budget of approximately \$4 million but are tackling some big initiatives such as the efficient use of irrigation water and developing new varieties of crops with enhanced water and temperature and stress resistance. Just a few quick examples include: Taking genes from drought resistant tolerant moss and improving heat tolerance, and a newly developed pollen transformation system for moving genes into cotton. They are also looking at root system efficiency for the uptake of water. These are just a few examples of the projects they are working on that I believe can have real impact on the farm.

But why is this type of research important and why should the American taxpayer care?

The human population is roughly 6 billion. At the beginning of the century, there were a billion and a half people on the earth. The number passed 2 billion in 1927, 3 billion in 1960, 4 billion in 1974, and 5 billion in 1987. Birthrates are coming down everywhere in the world - faster than expected. But we're still adding almost 80 million people to the population every year. This means that there will be another 2 to 4 billion people on the earth before the population stops growing. It has always been a source of pride that this country feeds the world. Well, you are about to have a lot more mouths to feed and clothe.

We are all increasingly aware of our need to take care of our environment. I think you have done a great job. We do face, however, challenge of feeding a larger population, while becoming even better stewards of our environment. We can only succeed through RESEARCH, by knowing more, and using that knowledge to make our agricultural practices more friendly and our food more nourishing. When we evaluate the risks and benefits of any particular innovation, such as the use of herbicide resistant crops, we need to evaluate them in the context of what we are already doing.

Cotton, corn and soybeans are the three primary GMOs on the market at this time, with many other crop innovations in development. More than 35 percent of the corn, 55 percent of the soybeans and about 50 percent of the cotton planted today are genetically modified. Currently most of the benefits of GMOs have gone to you, the producer, in what is commonly referred to as input traits. These include such examples as insect or herbicide resistance. While the initial benefit is to the producer through lower production costs, there are benefits to the consumer through lower costs as well.

Let's take one familiar case. Millions of acres have been planted with cotton (Bt Cotton) that is resistant to a major cotton pest, the cotton bollworm. People don't eat cotton plants, so there aren't any human health risks. But even for plants which people eat, adding the protein doesn't create a health risk because the protein that makes the plant resistant to certain insects isn't toxic to people. The good news for the environment is that in 1998, approximately 2 million fewer pounds of pesticide were applied to the fields than would have been applied in an ordinary cotton crop.

Scientists are now looking into improving output traits or traits that would directly benefit the consumer. One such example was developed here in Texas. Being a Texas Longhorn naturally I prefer orange carrots, but the maroon carrot developed at Texas A&M has increased levels of beta carotene, which evidence suggests helps to prevent cancer. I guess I could even eat a maroon carrot, knowing the tremendous health benefits, especially since we came out about even in our bowl games.

Biotechnology is an essential tool to address environmental problems, hunger and low income. Genetically improved food benefits everyone, for example, a poor rice farmer with one acre in Bangladesh can benefit as much as a large farmer in California. And the farmer doesn't have to learn a sophisticated new system; he or she only has to plant a seed. New rice strains being developed through biotechnology can increase yields by 30 to 40 percent. Another rice strain has the potential to prevent blindness in millions of children whose diets are deficient in Vitamin A.

I think we all recognize the benefits to GMOs are endless. However, there is an issue related to this that concerns me. It has just begun to peek its head over the horizon and it is going to be very important for you to get out in front on this issue and stay out in front. You will also need to join together with other agriculture groups. I believe that the fate of all GMOs is linked, whether the product is used for food or fiber. And remember, while cotton's primary use is as a fiber product, but it does have some food uses as well.

The controversy surrounding the production of GMOs is growing. This controversy sprang up in Europe and has begun to spread to the United States. I think one troubling example was the protests against GMOs at the recent international trade talks in Seattle.

It is growing more and more common to read a magazine article or turn on the TV and listen to a story on GMOs. With titles like "Who's Afraid", "Heartburn" and "Freezing out the Farmers" what average consumer would not begin to worry about the products they buy.

But are these fears or accusations legitimate? I want to quote a recent USA Today editorial, "But many of the attacks on the products of modern biotechnology amount to either blatant protectionism or anti-science blindness."

Is it the role of the government to guarantee public health and environmental safety when it comes to biotechnology and its products? The United States currently has in place the type of fair, transparent and independent regulatory process that provides confidence in the U.S. food safety system. This system is successful because it is: 1) based on science; 2) transparent and offers the opportunity for public input; and 3) independent of political influence.

Current FDA policy, based on existing food law, requires that all biotech food products to meet the same rigorous safety standards as is required of all other foods. Many of the food crops currently being developed using biotechnology do not contain substances that are significantly different from those already in the diet. FDA expects developers to consult with the agency on safety and regulatory questions.

FDA policy toward biotech foods -- which treats biotech and other foods the same, and requires labeling only to indicate safety concerns -- has served all stakeholders well. The FDA's approach has been applauded by the scientific community and industry as a paragon of risk-based regulation, and consumers have enjoyed thousands of safe, innovative, new products made with gene-spliced ingredients. All federal regulations on this or any other matter must balance consumer protection and common sense.

However, under pressure from environmental extremists, the FDA has begun a process that could potentially result in regulation so stringent that it will strangle the new technology. The result could well halt development of new technology, diminish choices for farmers and consumers, raise food prices, and even damage to the environment.

We have much to lose if this technology is not fully understood by the public. We must always remember the customer is always right. Can we afford these potential losses? I do not think so.

Let's start with trade. Experts predict that in the near future about 95 percent of U.S. agriculture exports will involve foods or other products modified in some way. The value of the global market in GMO crops grew from \$75 million in 1995 to \$1.64 billion in 1998. European countries have already called for labeling or a ban on the products all together. Can we afford to lose this market? I say no. We could lose the opportunity to have an impact on feeding the hungry. The world population is expected to grow between 40 and 100 percent during the next 30 years. Do we give up this chance to have an impact on feeding the hungry and malnourished? I say no.

And what about the environment? With plants that are naturally resistant to pests less chemicals are applied. Do we want to miss that opportunity to benefit the environment? I say no.

The anti-GMO sentiment is already starting to have a chilling effect in this country. Producers who raised GMO crops were told they would not be purchased by the baby food company that was also owned by the seed company. What kind of message does that send? By the way, the baby food company was recently divested.

A group of producers also filed suit against a seed company over GMOs and the public acceptance of the product. This battle is far from over.

This chilling effect could reach into Congress and the appropriation process as well. I would hate to see this happen to our valuable research.

As recent newspaper editorial issued a challenge to scientists, agribusiness and government. I am going to pass that challenge along to you:

Engineered plants must be stringently tested before being introduced to the field. One misstep would endanger years of research and billions in investments in the technology that could have such positive impacts on the environment and food and fiber production.

While activist organizations spend hundreds of thousands of dollars to promote fear through anti-science newspaper ads, 1.3 billion people, who live on less than \$1 a day, care only about finding their next day's meal. Biotechnology is one of the best hopes for solving their food needs today.

Those people, who battle weather, pests and plant disease to try to raise enough for their families, can benefit tremendously from biotechnology, and not just from products created by big corporations. Public-sector institutions are conducting work on high-yield rice, virus-resistant sweet potato and more healthful strains of crops that are staples in developing countries.

But none of these benefits will be realized if manufactured fears about biotechnology halt research funding and close borders to exported products. Public perception, and certainly the public positions of some of our nation's largest food processors is being manipulated by fringe groups opposed to progress and taken advantage of by those who support trade protectionism.

The benefits of GMOs must be communicated! You must be the loudest voice at the table. The court of public opinion will play a great role in future of biotechnology. You have a tremendous opportunity to shape that opinion and the information on this is just beginning to resound with the average consumer. Are you up to the challenge?

Thank you for the opportunity to be here today. I look forward to our continued working relationship.