

Bill Nye Gets Invited to Attend Another GMO Debate

By Keith Kloor | December 5, 2014 12:31 am

If you missed the recent [Intelligence Squared debate on GMOs](#), it's worth [watching](#). Or if you prefer, [read the transcript](#). Like [Nathanael Johnson](#), I was initially dubious about the event, then pleasantly surprised at how it turned out.

I was also a kinda surprised to see Bill Nye (*The Science Guy*) piggyback on it:



His opinion, alas, is not very Science Guy-like, as [we learned](#) several weeks ago. Some of you might recall the [open letter](#) from Kevin Folta, a University of Florida plant scientist, inviting Nye to participate in “a forum at a major university for a civil, evidence-based debate on the benefits and risks of agricultural biotechnology.”

The Science Guy never responded.

Nevertheless, he is sufficiently interested in the topic to have attended the GMO debate organized by [Intelligence Squared](#). He even got to ask a question:

My question is about time. Everybody can agree I think that you can know exactly what happens to any organism, any plant, any crop, but you cannot know — I believe you cannot know what happens to an ecosystem, so can the four of you agree on a number of seasons, a number of years, a number of plantings and harvestings where we would be — I think what people are concerned about is the effects on an ecosystem where you accidentally create a —

The moderator sensed Nye was veering off and cut in:

You were almost at a question mark there.

Nye, momentarily thrown, finished his thought:

Well, I am — well, what is the timescale for each side? Is it — for geologic time it's at least centuries, not five seasons. So, that's what everybody — I think what many people are concerned about with regard to genetically modified foods.

This was a roundabout way of suggesting that “many people” are concerned about potential negative impacts to an ecosystem. It's not clear what kind of ecosystem Nye had in mind. (Agricultural fields are human-made ecological systems that heavily modify landscapes to enable the growth of specific plants.) In any case, Nye was asking what timescale we should be thinking of when considering “the effects on an ecosystem”?

It was a fuzzy question that didn't really get answered. I think what we can infer from it is that Nye is vaguely concerned about environmental impacts from GMOs. What would be nice is for the Science Guy to articulate this concern more clearly, using what science says about this issue to lay out the potential scenario that worries him.

To that end, he has received another invitation to discuss his opinion about GMOs. It comes from three graduate students who have just shared their letter with me:

Dear Mr. Bill Nye and Dr. Kevin Folta,

We are graduate students at Purdue University studying plant physiology, biochemistry, and human nutrition and collectively have different views on the use and implementation of genetically modified crops. Being at a major land grant institution and surrounded by agriculture in every way, we recognize that farmers, who are stewards of their land and environment, are choosing to plant genetically modified crops because it is financially beneficially for them to do so. These crops offer benefits that save farmers valuable time and facilitate more consistent yields.

Recently, Mr. Bill Nye made unsupported comments about genetically modified crops that alarmed us. As students who are concerned about the impacts of farming on the environment, we were surprised that Mr. Nye's comments were made without substantiation from peer-reviewed research. Dr. Folta, a professor and department chair of the University of Florida's Horticulture Department, has a long standing reputation of echoing the scientific consensus on the safety of genetically modified crops and seems to hold views that are perpendicular to Mr. Nye's.

Mr. Nye has publicly pursued climate change and science deniers through debates and open forums in the past. Most famously, Mr. Nye formally debated Ken Ham in a public setting and demonstrated that belief-based arguments have no validity. It seems fair that Mr. Nye be given the opportunity to support the assertions that he made, but using the support of rigorous, peer-reviewed science that closely adheres to the scientific method that he has championed throughout his career.

As scientists, our fundamental mission is to better understand reality through the scientific method and logical reasoning. As such, we are offering to host a debate between both of you here at Purdue University. This is neutral ground and would be of great relevance to our mission as a university, to the farmers of our region, and to the students in our programs. We are willing to arrange a venue and provide moderation in a debate like those both of you have participated in previously and can be flexible to accommodate both of your busy schedules.

Agricultural biotechnology and environmental stewardship are of great interest to all of the students studying agriculture in various contexts. A frank discussion between two scientists with apparently contrasting views on the benefits and risks of this technology will be of wide interest and stimulate thoughtful discussion throughout the scientific community and the public.

Sincerely,

Michael Dzakovich

MS Student – Plant Physiology

Laura Henry

PhD Student – Biochemistry

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