



## Finally, a GMO debate without shouting

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When I heard that *Intelligence Squared U.S.* — which stages high-profile, Oxford-style debates — was going to [take on genetically modified foods](#), I sighed, deleted the notification, and then forgot about it.

Debates on this issue don't work very well. They tend to devolve into loud repetition of tribal mantras. This doesn't beget a civil discussion that allows the audience to see both sides deconstruct or defend their talking points. It's usually about as enlightening as listening to two groups of howler monkeys defending their turf. (Howler monkeys are sometimes called [the loudest animal in the world](#), but I'm pretty sure that we are.)

Nonetheless, I tuned in for part of this debate last night and was wonderfully surprised. Arguing for genetic engineering were Robb Fraley, Monsanto's CTO, and Alison Van Eenennaam, a scientist at UC Davis. Arguing for more caution on genetic engineering were Chuck Benbrook, a scientist at Washington State University, and Mardi Mellon, former senior scientist at the Union of Concerned Scientists. I've talked to, and respect, all these people. It was a good panel.

The moderator, John Donovan, pulled off a small miracle in crowd control, cutting off participants when they strayed from the point. The result was that each side actually had to concede those points that their opponents had gotten right, rather than making a swift lateral move to another subject. [Bill Nye](#) asked the panel a question on how long we'd need to test GE seeds to really understand the ecosystem-wide effects; paired with a follow-up from an audience member, that led to some interesting answers.

I'm happy to be able to recommend this debate as a primer on the subject. I actually learned a thing or two.