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We have to find a new way to feed the world

The GM role

DR GLENN TONG

IN 2008, all eyes here and around the world were focused on the GFC — the Global Financial Crisis. In 2009, the world will need to focus increasingly on another GFC — the Global Food Crisis.

Opponents of genetic modification (GM) will also need to accept that a key means of feeding the world's expanding population will be through GM crops.

Indeed, many anti-GM lobbyists are actively encouraging an illogical and fear-based view towards GM technologies that will result in mass poverty.

In 2008, the evidence for the mounting Global Food Crisis became more apparent.

Rising food prices caused violent riots in a number of countries including Morocco, Mexico, Senegal and Yemen. The President of the World Bank, Robert Zoellick said that the costs of food could mean "seven lost years" in fighting worldwide poverty.

Professor Norman Borlaug, who won the Nobel Prize in 1970 for his work increasing agricultural production in response to growing world famine at the time, has been widely credited with saving more lives than any other person in history.

Borlaug is clear on what he believes can alleviate the appalling high levels of starvation that currently exist.

Biotechnology in general, and GM technologies in particular, have the potential to succeed in areas where conventional plant breeding has found great difficulty.

Climate change is also a great threat to global food security.

The UN estimates climate change has doubled the number of disasters like flood and droughts over the past 20 years.

UN Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon said last year that food production must rise 50 per cent by 2030 to meet increasing demand from a growing population.

Our present global population of 6 billion is likely to grow to 9 billion by 2050.

A report by the Australian Bureau of Agriculture and Resource Economics has indicated that Australian production of wheat, beef, dairy and sugar could decline by as much as 19 percent by 2050 under climate change.

Borlaug has calculated that if agriculture was confined to organic farming only, we can at best feed 4 billion people.

It is therefore unbelievable that there are still interest groups that vehemently oppose innovative technologies like GM that could bring about significant improvements in agricultural production.

There is a critical need to look beyond conventional farming techniques or else a lot of people will starve.

GM crop research is focusing on providing solutions to the associated problems of climate change. These include high-energy GM pasture grasses and GM wheat varieties with improved drought tolerance.

It is easy to take a Luddite view in the good times. However, with the major challenges of climate change and the growing demand for staple crops like wheat outstripping productivity increases, this is certainly not a time for complacency.

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are actively encouraging an illogical and fear-based view towards GM technologies that will result in mass poverty.

Last year a group of top chefs across Australia signed an anti-GM charter calling on consumers to boycott restaurants that don't commit to being GM free.

Before Christmas a well known author of cook books condemned GM crops saying that those companies promoting them were analogous to Hitler and the murderous destruction he wrought.

The unstoppable wave of global population growth and the decline in arable land due to climate change and urbanisation means that we have to be able to grow more food on a given area of land.

GM technology is one of the tools that can make a real difference by speeding up the process of crop improvement and strengthening the armory that farmers have for attacking intractable problems like drought and salinity.

Instead of taking a "wait and see" approach to the development and adoption of new technologies, we need to embrace new technologies to stave off a Global Food Crisis.

■ Dr Tong is CEO of Molecular Plant Breeding CRC

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Dr Sanjaya Rajaram and Nobel Prize winning agromomist Dr Norman Borlaug discuss new wheat varieties