



Biotech Companies Promoting GM Apple to High School Students

Summary

High-school teachers and students across Canada were invited to a live webinar on March 7 called “Trashing Food Waste with Technology” that is actually a promotion for the newly approved genetically modified apple. The webinar and its associated lesson plans are part of ongoing public relations activities sponsored by the largest seed and pesticide companies in the world.

The companies have organized a program called “Agriculture in the Classroom” which mixes education about farming with promotion of their products. The program is part of a larger national agri-food industry “social license” campaign to gain public trust in corporate agrochemicals and genetically modified products.¹

Description of the Webinar

The corporate-sponsored public relations program called “Agriculture in the Classroom” is presenting a live webinar for high school students on March 7 to promote the genetically modified (GM or genetically engineered) non-browning “Arctic Apple.”² The webinar is part of “Canadian Agriculture Literacy Month.”

The webinar will be run by Jessica Brady, part of the marketing and communications team at the GM apple company Okanagan Specialty Fruits. The webinar is described as focusing on the GM apple but is called “Trashing Food Waste with Technology.”

Background on “Agriculture in the Classroom”

Among others, the program “Agriculture in the Classroom” is sponsored by four of the top six seed and pesticide companies in the world: Syngenta, Dupont, Dow AgroSciences and Bayer. Together these four companies own 36% of the global commercial seed market and 54% of the global pesticide market.³

Background on the GM apple

The first-ever genetically modified apple will be test-marketed in the US this year (in ten stores) in bags of sliced apples - but it is not yet for sale in Canada.⁴ In early 2015, the small Canadian company Okanagan Specialty Fruits (now owned by US biotechnology company Intrexon) got approval for its genetically modified non-browning Golden Delicious and Granny Smith apples in both Canada and the United States. The US government also just approved the company's GM Fuji apple. The GM apples all carry the trademark name "Arctic" but will not be labeled as genetically modified on grocery store shelves.

The Pre-Webinar Lesson Plan

The webinar comes with a lesson plan to prepare students.⁵ The "Live-Stream Pre-Activity" says:

*"Navigate the Arctic Apple website (individually or as a class). Inform students that the Arctic Apple is an example of a genetically modified food that is available to eat! Explore the website to learn more about Arctic Apples – this **will be the focus of the live stream event you and your class will be watching**" "Discuss the role of the consumer. **Talk about how consumers have incredible influence as to whether a product remains on the shelf** and how important it is to make informed decisions which are based on fact." (bolding added)*

- Then students are then asked to identify themselves as feeling comfortable or uncomfortable buying and eating food that has been genetically modified.
- Student are then asked to come up with "at least one question" to email to Agriculture the Classroom for follow-up.

Incorrect Information in the Lesson Plan

The "Live-Stream Pre-Activity" for students misinforms students even as it encourages them to "make informed decisions which are based on fact": The guide for teachers says, "Inform students that the Arctic Apple is an example of a genetically modified food that is available to eat!" This is incorrect. The company Okanagan Specialty Fruits says it will test-market bags of sliced GM Arctic apples in 10 stores in the Midwest US this year – but they have already confirmed to CBAN and in the media that the GM apple will not be sold in Canada this year.⁶ The company should be clear with all Canadians about where and when the GM apple will be sold.

The Issue of Food Waste and the “Arctic Apple”

The webinar is couched as a discussion about technological solutions to food waste because the company promotes their genetically modified non-browning apple as a solution. The company president Neal Carter has said: *“An apple’s not convenient enough. That’s the truth. The whole apple is too much of a commitment in today’s world.”*⁷

However, there are already non-GM techniques that industry and consumers use to slow browning after apples are cut (the industry uses ascorbic acid and the public uses lemon juice). Additionally, many varieties of apples are naturally slow-browning.

Additionally, use of the GM apples would contribute to environmental waste because the GM apples will be sold pre-sliced in plastic bags in the US (they are not yet sold in Canada). In January 2016, Neal Carter told the Ottawa Citizen: *“I don’t know if we’ll ever see them loose on the produce shelf. Maybe packaged in small bags or plastic containers.”*⁸

Controversy over the GM apple

The controversy over the GM apple covers many concerns, from many different communities:

- At least 38% of Canadians do not want to eat the GM apple.⁹ Before it was approved, 69% of Canadians did not want the GM apple approved.¹⁰
- The GM apple will not be labelled in stores as genetically modified. The company says the apple will carry the company “Arctic” logo.
- Many fruit growers in Canada were opposed to the approval of the GM apple because it threatens the market position for all apples. The BC Fruit Growers’ Association asked for a moratorium its approval, to protect the apple market from consumer backlash and confusion.
- Possible GM contamination is a risk for apple producers. Organic growers are particularly concerned about contamination from GM apple trees because GM is prohibited in organic farming.
- The Canadian government assessed the safety of the GM apple based on company data that is kept confidential. The government did not consult with farmers and consumers, and did not consider economic or social concerns.

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¹ See for example the presentation “Social License in Agriculture and Food” Farm & Food Care, March 11, 2015:

http://www.agpartners.ca/aepa/Portals/0/KimMcConnell_Social%20Licence%20in%20Ag_3-11-15.pdf

² The advertisement for the webinar is here: <http://www.aitc.ca/bc/news/119/56/Canadian-Agriculture-Literacy-Month>

³ Some of these companies are also about to merge with other companies to gain even more control over these markets. See www.cban.ca/corporatecontrol

⁴ For details and updates see www.cban.ca/apple

⁵ The pre-webinar lesson plan is here:

<http://www.aitc.ca/bc/uploads/CALM%20Live%20Stream%20Pre-Activity.pdf>

⁶ Letter from Neal Carter, Okanagan Specialty Fruits to Lucy Sharratt, Canadian Biotechnology Action Network, August 22, 2016. See also Laura Robin, From tree to table: The Arctic Apple is ready to blossom, Ottawa Citizen, January 2016. <http://ottawacitizen.com/storyline/from-tree-to-table-the-arctic-apple-is-ready-to-blossom>

⁷ Stephanie M. Lee, Say Hello To The Apple That Never Browns, BuzzFeed, November 10, 2015.

https://www.buzzfeed.com/stephaniemlee/uncommon-core?utm_term=.mjKOz6eE0#.qlzI9DkA6

⁸ Laura Robin, From tree to table: The Arctic Apple is ready to blossom, Ottawa Citizen, January 2016.

<http://ottawacitizen.com/storyline/from-tree-to-table-the-arctic-apple-is-ready-to-blossom>

⁹ Ipsos Reid, Commissioned by the Canadian Biotechnology Action Network, September 2015 available at www.cban.ca/2015poll

¹⁰ Leger Marketing, Commissioned by the BC Fruit Growers’ Association and the Quebec Apple Producers’ Association, 2012. <http://www.bcfga.com/files/file/Report%20on%20GE%20survey%20-%20July%203%202012.pdf>