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## Character Assassination Has No Place in GMO Discussion

By Ken Grace | 11/22/2013

If you can't attack the message, attack the messenger. The recent [Civil Beat article](#) by Dr. Hector Valenzuela brought to light a disturbing theme in the ongoing discussions about genetically modified crops - the implication that scientists who conduct research on crop genetics or have received funding to support their research are biased and cannot be trusted to make truthful statements about GM crops.

This unfounded and inaccurate accusation that research funding buys biased results has actually been stretched even further as essentially a blanket condemnation of all university agricultural scientists (ironically except for those making the accusation). For example, in a recent [radio interview](#) about the GMO controversy in Hawaii, it was noted that agricultural scientists at the University of Florida were guilty of a conflict of interest because a pesticide manufacturer had been acknowledged in an agricultural publication distributed by that university. There was no connection to the particular scientist being discussed, except that he was in the same college.

The implication that funded research equals biased research perpetuates a misunderstanding about how universities operate. Universities pay for faculty salaries and buildings. All other costs of doing scientific research are expected to come from extramural grants and contracts. This is how professors pay student stipends, buy supplies and equipment, and can afford to travel for research purposes or to attend conferences. To imply that faculty sell their souls for this financial support is ridiculous.

In science, obtaining extramural funds is part of a professor's job, so that she can carry out research that benefits the public. Scientists who are unable to obtain either private or public support for their research efforts would never be considered more "independent" by their colleagues, although it's possible in some cases that they might be considered less productive. Please note that I'm talking about university science research specifically here, since certainly there are some fields of study where extramural funding is not as necessary nor the norm.

Private companies fund research at universities precisely because they want new and unbiased information. They look to experts in the field for honest results. When the research funding comes from public agencies like USDA, as is the case with Dr. Miyasaka and others accused of conflicts of interest by Dr. Valenzuela, it is especially ludicrous to condemn any statements they make about the benefits of GM crops as biased.

These are scientists with degrees in crop science who have devoted their careers to applying modern tools to solve serious agricultural problems. It sets a dangerous precedent for society when we are told that we can't believe the real experts, who have spent years studying crop science and genetics. Instead, we are asked to trust individuals who do not have such training and experience and whose lack of knowledge is misconstrued to mean a lack of bias.

Unfounded attacks on the ethics and motives of agricultural researchers, who are often the peers and colleagues of those making the attacks, should be unacceptable. Likewise, the claims are misleading that there is no scientific consensus supporting GM crop safety when one [clearly exists](#), as is well illustrated [here](#) and [here](#). Of course there are always dissenters, and references continue to be made to a few debunked studies purporting to [demonstrate harm](#).

Setting imaginary fears aside, there are legitimate issues to discuss here, but they are more political than scientific issues. Unfortunately, fear sells better than serious discussions of land use policy, population growth, climate change, energy and economic policies.

Instead of fearing bogeymen, we need to focus on the need to apply all the tools available to us to create sustainable agriculture systems in the face of a rapidly increasing population, rising energy costs, constant pest and disease pressure, and arid and less fertile land across the globe. Clearly, genetic modification is expensive and will not be the answer to every problem, but it can be an [important tool to fight pests](#), to increase yields while [decreasing the need for inputs like fertilizer and water](#), and to save lives by [increasing plant nutritional content](#). Rather than attacking each other, we really need to work together to feed the world.

**About the author:** *Dr. Ken Grace is an entomologist and Interim Associate Dean and Director for Research in the College of Tropical Agriculture and Human Resources (CTAHR), University of Hawaii at Manoa. He has been with the college for 24 years, including nine years as chair of the Department of Plant and Environmental Protection Sciences. The views expressed are his own and not those of CTAHR.*

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Discussion



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**Karl Haro von Mogel** · Top Commenter · Co-Executive Editor at Biology Fortified, Inc.

Thank you Ken for writing this. I was one of the invited scientists who spoke at the GMO Summit on the Big Island where Hector also spoke. I made it clear then that although the HCIA brought me out there, I declined receiving an honorarium and was out money for the trip. To then see him say that the facts that I presented during my talk should be disregarded because of this, along with any opinion I already held, is preposterous. Indeed, I don't recall Hector Valenzuela calling out Babes Against Biotech for receiving money from a competing-industry nonprofit (Sustainable Pulse) - instead, I hear, their calendar is plastered on his office door.

What Hector said about making unreferenced claims was also completely false. When he spoke at the GMO Summit, he said that all the benefits claimed from GE crops are "fabricated," which w ... [See More](#)

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**Renee Morey Kester**

Thank you Dean Grace for setting the record straight and reaffirming that the experts are in fact who we should look to for information. I was appalled by Valenzuela's recent assault on fellow University of Hawaii scientists credibility, he not only undermined agriculture but the academic system as well with that one baseless attack.

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**Richard Ha** · Top Commenter · Works at Hamakua Springs Country Farms

Dr Valenzuela was the second most prominent subject matter expert that the sponsors of the anti GMO bills brought in to get advise. Councilors Brenda Ford and Margaret Wille beamed in the yogic flying Jeffrey Smith as their primary expert. He was very good at what he does, scare people and sell books. <http://academicsreview.org/review-ed-individuals/jeffrey-smith/>. Instead of shooting messengers and scaring people, we need to do a serious assessment of comparative risks facing us as a society. The Energy Return on Energy Invested, the net energy available to society, is declining the more difficult it is to get the energy. The implications for us sitting out here in the middle of the ocean is enormous. The anti GMO bill just passed on the Big Island prohibits only Big Island farmers from utilizing newly developed bio tech solutions. Dr Valenzuela advised organic farmers to seek high end niche markets. So, we hamper the ability of conventional farmers to compete and we advise organic farmers to seek high end markets. What about the rubbah slippah folks? Sen Ruderman was quoted in the new spaper saying this is about corporations pure and simple. Huh?

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**Guy Ward** · Manual High School

I don't intend to be decisive but, "organic" farming is a production system that uses more land and resources to produce less and more expensive food. That's fine for supplying niche markets, but it will not feed the world.

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**Kristan Hunt** · Owner & Manager at Hamakua Hideaway Cliff House in Kukuiahae

Richard, do you have children and grandchildren that you care about? Or are you just interested in the money?

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**Alicia Maluafiti**

Mahalo to Richard Ha, Dr. Grace, Karl, and many others in the agricultural and scientific communities for helping Hawaii farmers. Mr. Valenzuela and other extremists (including this lady Kristan Hunt) resort to personal attacks when they lack the ability to attack science and fact. Wait for it....wait for it....here it comes.

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