Dan Glickman
Outgoing Secretary Says Agency's Top Issue is Genetically Modified Food

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Veneman, the new secretary of agriculture, faces tough problems as she takes office, including what to do about genetically modified food.

eman served on the board of Calgene, a company ed by Monsanto Co. * Bill Clinton's agriculture etary, Dan Glickman, warned his replacement, Ann eman, that biotechnology policy may become her t difficult problem. But in her speedy confirmation, eman revealed almost nothing about her views.

ig with the keys to his office, the departing U.S. etary of agriculture, Dan Glickman, gave advice at biotechnology to Ann Veneman, the Californian replaced him.

ready, he said, for a full-throated debate about atically modified food that awaits you when you c in the door.

technology is going to be thrust on her, as Dick ney would say, big time. Whether she wants it or it will be on her, like it was on me, big time," man said, mimicking the voice of the new vice ident during an interview with the Post-Dispatch.

advice from Glickman and others has been mostly friendly. On her way to speedy confirmation, eman endured none of the ideological warfare that greeted some of Bush's appointees - notably h Ashcroft as attorney general and Gale Norton as interior secretary.

ed, Veneman's confirmation hearing last week had the tenor of a Farm Bureau ice cream social. ete Agriculture Committee members refrained from grilling her, all but ignoring biotech and other mming headaches that Glickman warned about.

eman sailed into her new job offering little more than bromides about common sense and eration.

hard-working men and women who provide our food and fiber have been tested by low prices, weather and other adversities," she said, giving little indication as to how she will proceed.

experienced policymaker

than a few Midwesterners, members of Congress among them, groused initially that hington's top farm job went to a lawyer from California rather than to a farmer from the nation's dbasket. Charles Kruse, president of the Missouri Farm Bureau, was believed to be under nderation for the job.

ere were a lot of folks who believed that the secretary of agriculture should come from the middle ion of the country," Kruse said. "But I think that the agriculture community is going to get behind and try to help her. It doesn't matter where you're from."

"What I saw generically on the pro-biotech side was the attitude that the technology was good and that it was almost immoral to say that it wasn't good because it was going to solve the problems of the human race and feed the hungry and clothe the naked. And there was a lot of money that had been invested in this, and if you're against it, you're Luddites, you're stupid. There was rhetoric like that even here in this department. You felt like you were almost an alien, disloyal, by trying to present an open-minded view on some of the issues being raised. So I pretty much spouted the rhetoric that everybody else around here spouted; it was written into my speeches"- Dan Glickman
Her detractors couldn’t dismiss Veneman’s experience. She was the No. 2 Agriculture Department official in the administration of Bush’s father a decade ago and she headed California’s culture agency for a four-year period afterward. Veneman, 51, is the easy-going daughter of a farmer, with a knack both for policy and for charming senators.

May need her winning ways to handle farmers skeptical both of her and the direction of the on’s farm policy. They worry that she is too aligned with the agriculture establishment to departively from the Freedom to Farm policy, a deregulation effort that drove down crop prices to the level in a generation.

Discovery last fall of adulterated StarLink modified corn in the food supply laid bare the gaps in U.S. regulatory system. The scorching news accounts showed, too, how unanticipated problems threaten consumer confidence in a new technology.

Result of StarLink, Veneman will be pressed more quickly to answer vexing questions:

- How can widespread DNA testing be incorporated into an emerging two-track food system - one that is genetically engineered and one that is not?
- What kind of rules and liability might be established in cases of wind-blown pollen from genetically modified crops?

Farm Bureau’s Kruse didn’t plant StarLink. But he has planted other varieties of corn engineered insect resistance, and he believes that the future of farming lies in genetic engineering. He acts Veneman to be aggressive, he said, in answering the technology’s critics.

There are some people who would have you believe that we should stop anything remotely treated with genetically enhanced crops because we're going to have a monster tomato,” he said.

Christison, of Chillicothe, Mo., president of the National Family Farm Coalition, is a leading critic of American farm policy. He said he was prepared to give Veneman a chance, but his views are exactly opposite that of Kruse when it comes to modified crops.

Christison wants the Department of Agriculture to stop promoting genetically modified seeds, which nsists have done farmers more harm than good. “There’s no reason we need this kind of technology at this juncture in time. People around the world aren’t accepting genetically modified I, and the government ought to stop propping up these biotech crops,” he said.

Cheerleader or regulator?

Veneman must decide if she will be cheerleader or regulator of genetically modified crops. Glickman v uneasy playing both roles at the same time.

Department of Agriculture is one of three federal agencies splitting the task of regulating food technology under a system that has changed little since the mid-1980s. The Environmental Protection Agency and the Food and Drug Administration share the duties.

Agriculture Department decides which genetic experiments on crops can take place outdoors. It oversees field trials by companies before gene-altered food reaches the market.

Despite the department’s regulatory role, the biotech industry and many farm groups have expected be a promoter of genetically modified food. Often it was, even helping to develop the minator,” the controversial genetic technology that renders the seeds of crops sterile in order to e farmers to buy new seed.

He interview, Glickman recalled the boosterish climate. “What I saw generically on the biotech side was the attitude that the technology was good and that it was almost moral to say that it wasn’t good because it was going to solve the problems of the human race and feed the hungry and clothe the naked,” Glickman said. “And there was a of money that had been invested in this, and if you’re against it, you’re Luddites, you’re pod.

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999, with European resistance to modified food mounting and a de facto moratorium on new rovals of crops taking shape on the continent, Glickman broke ranks. He had grown concerned the U.S. government was pushing genetic engineering without taking stock of consumer worries. American farmers, he worried, could be left in the lurch.

His speech, at Purdue University, he asserted that the United States "can't force-feed consumers" nd the world.

Another speech, delivered at the Press Club in Washington, Glickman advised biotechnology panies to consider labeling genetically modified food to help prevent consumer fears from
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leading to the United States.

't was not what the heavily invested industries - or the White House, for that matter - had expected him to say. He purposely had not submitted his speech for approval beforehand, he illed, because he knew it would be returned to him "sterile." Afterward, he felt the heat.

ere were some people in this government who were very upset with me. Very upset. They thought I had changed our trade policy unilaterally. Like a lot of politicians, I wanted to be loved. So I very worried about it," Glickman said.

ays later, after encountering the president's wife, Hillary Rodham Clinton, at a state dinner in White House, he breathed easier. Glickman continued the story:

'd said, 'I saw the story about your speech in the New York Times.' I said to her, 'There were some people in the White House that didn't like it'. She said, 'I liked it.' So I knew I wasn't going to be fired."

eman thinks the federal agencies that regulate modified food ought to get together soon for what called "a thorough review of how GMOs (genetically modified organisms) are regulated by our government. I think it does need further clarity."

de group is optimistic

eman has not said publicly how she will proceed. Some of her past actions in Washington may r clues. In 1992, as deputy agriculture secretary, she announced further streamlining of fielding requirements that the biotech industry wanted and that skeptics considered deficient.

998, testifying as California's agriculture secretary before a Senate subcommittee, she uttered mantra offered by the government and industry justifying resistance to mandatory labeling. "Risk would be evaluated in terms of product, not the production method," she said with regard to genetically modified food.

ael Phillips of the Biotechnology Industry Organization says that his trade group is hopeful, based what members of Bush's transition team told him in private meetings. Noting Glickman's pendence, Phillips said he hoped that Veneman operates in lock step with the White House, he wants to see a strong figure in charge of biotech policy.

oy did not coordinate well. ... It seemed like the left hand did not know what the right hand was doing," he said of the outgoing administration.

arl, director of Iowa State University's Center for Agriculture and Rural Development, ranks genetically modified food at the top of his list of serious problems facing agriculture. He predicts that future of food biotechnology - whether it becomes dominant or occupies a much smaller role - will known in three to five years.

sat on a high-profile advisory committee put together by Glickman to give him advice on technology. He has not heard whether it will continue but does not expect it to.

early test for Veneman, he said, will be her decision on licensing the "Terminator" technology; the culture Department co-owns the patent with a Mississippi seed company.

ill be looking, too, for what role, if any, Veneman takes in revamping the government's "sight. "I think that cooler hands and sounder minds understand that we need to take a new look ow we regulate GMOs," he said.

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