

Susie Kiene/DN

Jennifer Graebner takes a break from the days' seminars outside of Hamilton Hall. Graebner was in town from Missouri on Tuesday for the Thespian Festival.

## DNA research can make food cheaper, healthier

By Doug Kerns  
Staff Reporter

Unless you happen to be O.J. Simpson, you may wonder how DNA technology could possibly affect your life, especially here in Nebraska.

The Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resources at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln is striving to study this basic building block of life to enhance crops and livestock in the Heartland.

The IANR is conducting basic and applied DNA research in a wide variety of agricultural areas, from cheese bacteria to swine pseudorabies virus.

Dr. Steve Baenziger, head of agronomy, said, "It can make food cheaper and healthier, and agriculture more productive."

Dr. Anne Vidaver, head of plant pathology, said, "People have to remember that everyday they are consuming the products of genetic material."

Since the DNA (deoxyribonucleic acid) strand is too small to see, scientists must use indirect chemical methods to analyze and alter it. Baenziger said, "DNA technology makes our research more precise."

IANR scientists can insert altered DNA into plants using a gene gun.

"The first challenge is to get it into the DNA of the plant, then to have it expressed, then to have it expressed from one generation to another," Vidaver said.

Often, plants are resistant to the newly altered DNA. This is similar to a human's ability to resist disease.

"We've evolved so that it's not easy for something either good or bad to get into us. It's the same thing with plants," she said.

The IANR also applies DNA technology to livestock.

Dr. Jack Schmitz, head of veterinary and biomedical sciences, said, "It contributes to trying to hold down the cost of the food supply because of reducing the cost of animal diseases."

In DNA research, a key difference between animals and humans is that people carry many more genetic diseases than animals.

This is because obvious genetic flaws are removed from the animal population through breeding, Schmitz said.

What about fears of possible public backlash from DNA technology?

Schmitz said, "There have been thousands of examples of things that people have argued were not moral at the time they started, yet now they are commonplace."

Will DNA technology eventually replace traditional breeding methods?

Perhaps, but not in the present. Vidaver said, "The relative cost is at least 10 times what traditional breeding is. It's a big investment."

Possible future applications of DNA technology are manifold, from larger fish by hormone manipulation to an all-purpose vaccine for major viral illnesses.

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