This year is the 20th anniversary of the commercialization of the first genetically modified crops. The focus of this year’s NABC meeting was to explore many of the complex issues surrounding GM crops, such as farmer needs, international trade and responsible stewardship and coexistence. The meeting set out to address the questions ‘What are our challenges today and what will be our challenges for the future?’

The tone was set by Kathleen Merrigan of George Washington University. Kathleen initiated a discussion of the state of the GMO debate today from a policy standpoint. While admitting that a portion of the debate over GM technology seemed ‘nonsensical,’ she emphasized the need for regulatory issues, and in particular risk assessment, to become more center stage. She remarked on the negative impact that aspects of the debate had placed upon some farmers, and the fact that the public was often polarized to be either pro or anti-biotech with no common ground in between.

The theme of the conference shifted toward issues affecting international trade of biotech crops. Several speakers focused on the paucity of regulations in developing countries, as well as the asynchrony of authorizations, in which the timing for approval of biotech products between the US and its trading partners may vary by as much as several years. International trade disputes created through contamination of non-GMO products by the low level presence of genetically modified products were presented by several speakers.

The role of the University in developing materials to provide students with better informed viewpoints and growers with the best management practices for coexistence was also discussed. The new diversity of production approaches can present economic opportunities for organic, conventional and farmers who use biotechnology alike, which should be encouraging. However, a lack of consumer confidence, as depicted by the recent debate on GMO/non-GMO labeling, can negatively impact all forms of agricultural trade. Several speakers mentioned how important it is to recognize the interdependence of supply chains in the global food system. A number of presenters also brought up the fact that these coexistence and trade challenges must be
addressed in order to meet global challenges with respect to climate change and food security. Regulatory divergence between international trading partners regarding biotech crops could result in smaller markets and returns on investment, and thus slower rates of technological improvement, resulting in less contribution to food security for developing countries.

The sessions concluded with a discussion of the types of ‘framing’ arguments that have polarized the dialog between people who are pro or anti-GMO. William Hallman of Rutgers University described how people define their identities and lifestyle by what foods they choose, and biotechnology is still an abstract concept for many. The conference ended with a round table session that addressed these challenges.