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# Genetic Engineering and Consumer Choice

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The stealthy introduction of genetically modified (GM) foods into the food chain has raised significant challenges to consumer choice. Under current labelling legislation it has been estimated that the majority of foods containing ingredients from genetically engineered sources will not be required to be labelled as such. Sue Davies of the Consumer Association has asserted that "current GM labelling laws fall short of consumer demands" (Farmers Guardian, June 14, 2002.)

## Public Opinion

The majority of the public are opposed to the introduction of GM crops. This fact underlines the importance of protecting the consumers right to choose GM-free products. A recent Mori poll (July 2003) revealed that just one in seven (14%) members of the public support GM foods compared with just under half the population (46%) who oppose them.

A survey published by the Consumers Association in June 2002 found that consumers want food made with GM-derived ingredients to be labelled. The survey revealed that 94 per cent of consumers want all food containing GM ingredients to be labelled as such, while 87 per cent of consumers think that products should be labelled GM even if it cannot be detected in the final product.

## Current labelling legislation

The current EU labelling legislation is not sufficient to ensure consumers can choose GM-free products. GM labelling rules are decided at a European level. Following a five year moratorium on the production of GM crops and approval of new GM foods in the European Union (EU), a law has now been passed allowing GM foods to be sold in Europe for the first time. This new legislation will probably come into force in the Autumn of 2003.

Under the new legislation;

- Only food with more than 0.9 per cent GM content will have to be labelled as containing GM.
- Derivatives (such as sugar and oil) and animal feed containing more than 0.9 per cent genetically modified content will have to be labelled.
- Meat and dairy products from animals fed GM feed do not have to be labelled
- Records must be kept at each stage of the food chain to ensure full traceability of GM products.
- Individual EU countries will be able, should they so choose, to impose measures in an attempt to prevent contamination of non-GM crops.

This legislation is not tight enough to ensure that members of the public are able to choose products uncontaminated by GMOs or to safeguard genuine freedom of choice. The thresholds that have been set deny consumers the *right to know* whether their food does or

does not contain GM ingredients. Lower thresholds are feasible as GM content of 0.1 per cent can be detected by current techniques.

### The British Government's position

The British Government has stated that they accept the right of the individual to choose whether or not to eat genetically engineered ingredients. Under current legislation this right is not satisfactorily protected, and the government instead of pressing for tighter legislation have come out in opposition to it.

The British Government, acting on the advice of the Food Standards Agency, did not support the European Commission proposal to give consumers greater information about the use of GM derived ingredients, when it was debated last summer in the European Union. They have also found themselves in the minority among European countries in opposing lowering the maximum levels of contamination in non-GM food. The Soil Association's Director, Patrick Holden, stated "The Government, represented by the Food Standards Agency, has let down the public as the UK was the only country pushing for higher thresholds for the labelling of GM products."

### Labelling and the impact on choice

- Due to the current labelling legislation consumers have lost their right to choose whether or not to eat products that contain genetically engineered ingredients
- Meat and dairy products from animals fed on genetically engineered foods do not need to be labelled
- Even organic foods which expressly prohibit the use of GE may not be able to claim to be GE free in the future due to 'genetic pollution' - the spread of genes through cross-fertilisation and contamination in the food chain.
- Vegetarians and religious groups may lose their right not to eat products that contain genes from certain animals (e.g. muslims may unwittingly eat genes from a pig)

### GM and organic

The use of GMO's in organic food and farming is strictly prohibited. The commercial introduction of GM crops into the UK could seriously threaten the organic sector.

Our report 'Seeds of Doubt' looks at the negative effects that the commercial introduction of GM crops has had in the United States and Canada. It highlights some of the ways in which the commercial introduction of GM crops can impact on consumer choice;

- Contamination has caused the loss of nearly the whole organic oilseed rape sector in the province of Saskatchewan. Organic farmers are struggling practically and economically; many have been unable to sell their produce as organic due to contamination. Should these problems spread to other countries, consumers could find themselves in a position where certain organic products are no-longer on the market, or are so scarce that prices rise dramatically.
- The commercial introduction of GM jeopardises the non-GM sectors and therefore consumers right to buy GM-free products. All non-GM farmers are finding it very hard or impossible to grow GM-free crops. Seeds have become almost completely contaminated with GMOs, good non-GM varieties have become hard to buy, and there is a high risk of crop contamination.
- As a result of the lack of segregation, the whole food processing and distribution

system has become vulnerable to costly and disruptive contamination incidents. In September 2000, just one per cent of unapproved GM maize contaminated almost half the national maize supply and cost the company responsible, Aventis, up to \$1 billion.

### **The Industry Position**

- Industry interests have lobbied fiercely to ensure weak labelling legislation governing food products containing genetically engineered ingredients.
- The United States government have decided to file a formal complaint against the EU with the World Trade Organisation (WTO) as a result of it's position over this issue on grounds of fair trade.
- A senior US official has complained that the new EU labelling legislation 'would place a huge burden on the entire marketing process'.
- There is no labelling of GM products in America.

### **Genetic Engineering and the Soil Association**

The Soil Association believes that the use of genetic engineering in agriculture is too great a risk to take and therefore has no place in the production of safe and healthy food. Organic farming systems have been designed to produce food with care for human health, the environment and animal welfare. The use of genetically engineered crops is not compatible with this aim. This position is shared by the organic movement worldwide and the majority of the public.

### **Legislation recommendations**

- A ban on the use of genetically engineered ingredients in human and animal foods.
- A ban on the commercial planting of genetically engineered crops in the UK.

### **Until there is a ban, then there must be :**

- Tighter regulations governing the release of genetically engineered organisms into the environment.
- Stringent regulations for clear and informative labelling which identifies the inclusion of all detectable genetically engineered ingredients or derivatives in foods.
- Labelling of meat and dairy products from animals fed on genetically engineered foods.

### **For more information on GE please contact the Soil Association and order a full set of briefing sheets free of charge**

How can I support the work of the Soil Association?

The Soil Association is a membership charity, we urgently need your support to continue our work. As public support for the Soil Association continues to grow, our ability to influence the thinking and policies of government and big business grows with it. In this way we help to develop a truly healthy and sustainable future. Join us today and help us to continue campaigning for sustainable agriculture and organic food. You can join the Soil Association on our website, over the phone or by writing to us.

### **Further Reading**

Please see the Soil Association website library, <http://www.soilassociation.org/library>, for

more information

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