

GM: the scientific argument is over

By Matt Ridley, The Times, 5 Mar 2015

The European Parliament votes tomorrow on whether to let countries decide their own policies on growing genetically modified crops. The vote would allow countries such as Britain to press ahead because of hard evidence that such crops are good for the environment, good for consumers and good for farmers; and let countries such as Austria continue to ban the things despite such evidence. It's an alliance of the rational with the superstitious against the bureaucratic.

A triumph of subtle diplomacy

Indeed, the untold story is that it was a triumph of subtle diplomacy by Owen Paterson — the Eurosceptic former environment minister who knows how to work the Brussels system. Having gone out on a limb to support GM crops in two hard-hitting speeches in 2013, he was approached by his Spanish counterpart who was desperate to unclog the interminable Brussels approval process for new crops.

Spain, the only European country growing GM maize, wanted to try a new variety. The approval process had been designed by the big green multinationals — Friends of the Earth, Greenpeace and co — who wield enormous power in Brussels. It was taking new varieties up to ten years to get through the maze they had built, discouraging applicants.

Obdurate for purely superstitious reasons

So Britain and Spain set out quietly to lobby the other countries. Those opposed to GM were won over by the argument that repatriating the decision meant they could remain obdurate for purely superstitious reasons, and not be forced by world trade rules into accepting GM crops if the science supported them. So at a ministerial meeting in Brussels last June, Mr Paterson and his anti-GM Austrian counterpart went round the table together persuading countries to support the proposal, whether they liked GM crops or not.

It helped that the Greeks, who were anti-GM crops, put the proposal forward. This lulled the French, who liked the existing system of a de-facto ban by bureaucratic delay, into missing what was going on until it was too late. Only Belgium and Luxembourg abstained. Now the parliament is the last obstacle.

The facts are in

Scientifically, the argument over GM crops is as good as over. With nearly half a billion acres growing GM crops worldwide, the facts are in. Biotech crops are on average safer, cheaper and better for the environment than conventional crops. Their benefits accrue disproportionately to farmers in poor countries. The best evidence comes in the form of a “meta-analysis” — a study of studies — carried out by two scientists at Göttingen University, in Germany.

The greatest gains were in the developing world

The strength of such an analysis is that it avoids cherry-picking and anecdotal evidence. It [found](#) that GM crops have reduced the quantity of pesticide used by farmers by an average of

37 per cent and increased crop yields by 22 per cent. The greatest gains in yield and profit were in the developing world.

If Europe had adopted these crops 15 years ago: rape farmers would be spraying far less pyrethroid or neo-nicotinoid insecticides to control flea beetles, so there would be far less risk to bees; potato farmers would not need to be spraying fungicides up to 15 times a year to control blight; and wheat farmers would not be facing stagnant yields and increasing pesticide resistance among aphids, meaning farmland bird numbers would be up.

Oh, and all that nonsense about GM crops giving control of seeds to big American companies? The patent on the first GM crops has [just expired](#), so you can grow them from your own seed if you prefer and, anyway, conventionally bred varieties are also controlled for a period by those who produce them.

African farmers denied GM benefits

African farmers have been mostly denied genetically modified crops by the machinations of the churches and the greens, aided by the European Union's demand that imports not be transgenically improved. Otherwise, African farmers would now be better able to combat drought, pests, vitamin deficiency and toxic contamination, while not having to buy so many sprays and risk their lives applying them.

'Bigger green charities would punish us mercilessly'

I made this point recently to a charity that works with farmers in Africa and does not oppose GM crops but has so far not dared say so. Put your head above the parapet, I urged. We cannot do that, they replied, because we have to work with other, bigger green charities and they would punish us mercilessly if we broke ranks. Is the bullying really that bad? Yes, they replied.

Yet the Green Blob realises that it has made a mistake here. Not a financial mistake — it made a fortune out of donations during the heyday of stoking alarm about GM crops in the late 1990s — but the realisation that all it has achieved is to prolong the use of sprays and delay the retreat of hunger.

Likewise the organic farming movement made a mistake. For them GM crops were a potential godsend that could have made organic crops genuinely competitive, instead of a small niche for the wealthy. Here was a technology that was organic, in that it used biology instead of chemistry. In one case it even used the very same substance to fight insects that organic farmers had been using for decades — called Bt.

However, the organic movement decided to oppose GM crops and has paid the price by shrinking into irrelevance: only 2 per cent of [food sales in Britain](#) are now organic, and in a recent survey ethical concern was the least important of ten factors driving shoppers' food choices. Ironically, the organic movement happily uses crops whose genetic material has been modified in a much less careful way — by gamma rays or chemical mutagens — for these are categorised as “conventional” crops and lightly regulated. Golden Promise barley, used by organic brewers, for example, was made in a nuclear reactor.

The next technologies are different again

In practice, we in Europe may have missed most of the GM revolution, for the next technologies are different again. The future lies with a combination of conventional breeding with precise gene-editing, rather than gene transplants from other species. This should enable the last of the critics of GM crops to climb off their high horses without anybody noticing.

Supporters of GM crops have no wish to ban conventional or organic varieties. They just want to allow GM crops as well. Their opponents, however, insist on total intolerance of things they abhor. There are echoes here of the battle for free speech.

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