

POSITION STATEMENT

Genetically Modified Crops

The National Trust is not opposed in principle to genetic modification technology. We believe it has the potential to provide significant benefits. We also recognise, however, that it has the potential to cause harm. Important questions remain unanswered about the safety and desirability of GM, and its effects on environment, local and national economies, consumer choice and human health.

National Trust staff have expertise in a variety of areas that overlap with the GM debate. Nevertheless our resources are limited and we are not in a position to analyse the increasing amount of information and research produced on GM technology. GM is becoming established in medicine and pharmaceuticals, and has applications across the food chain. The fact that GM has so many possible applications means that assessing its potential impacts is a complex task. Knowledge of the impacts involved is far from complete.

The Trust has decided that the development of GM crops is the aspect of GM technologies that is currently of most direct relevance to the Trust's purposes. This Position Statement therefore deals primarily with the situation relating to GM crops in the UK.

Assessing safety

It is not possible to generalise about the safety of GM crop technology, so the potential impacts of each application need to be assessed separately. The current Field Scale Evaluations are only examining limited impacts of certain types of GM crops. There is no comprehensive sustainability assessment looking at impacts in a wider context. Nor is it yet clear whether all future applications to grow GM crops commercially will be subject even to this limited level of experimentation. The Trust could only support a system that assesses every application for commercial growing on a case by case basis.

Avoiding adverse impacts

GM crops may have unforeseen adverse impacts which need to be properly understood before judgements can be made. These could range from environmental impacts, such as pollution of wild flora and fauna or soils, to economic impacts on both conventional and organic farming. Where there is a known risk of unacceptable adverse impact, there should be a presumption against the commercial growing of that GM crop. All assessments of the potential impacts of GM crops should be based around this fundamental assumption. The Trust would also strongly support efforts to minimise impacts by adapting working practices.

Risks and Sustainability

GM crops should not be introduced until the potential risks are properly understood following rigorous impartial assessment and a comprehensive sustainability assessment¹ has been carried out. A sustainability assessment, taking a much wider view than the current Field

¹ A sustainability appraisal assesses the possible effects of an 'action' on environment, people, culture and economy. It attempts to take a longer-term view of inputs, outputs and change by assessing the life-cycle of the action, the longevity of its impacts, and most importantly the extent to which outputs can be sustained by the inputs.

Scale Evaluations, would allow decisions on the commercial growing of GM crops to be made from an informed perspective.

Approval process

The Government's public GM debate offers a welcome opportunity for wide consultation on the issues surrounding GM technology. The public must have confidence in the objectivity of the process and be assured that public opinion will be properly taken into account in any decisions relating to introductions of commercial GM crops. Beyond the timescale of the debate, a high level of public involvement should be maintained in assessing any future applications to grow GM crops.

Regulating GM

To date there has been no attempt to agree international standards on the growing of GM crops. This is a significant failing, given that GM crops are already widely grown around the world. There are already successful examples of international regulations governing the use of technologies with global impacts, such the ISO system for approving pesticides. The Trust would support the development of systems, at local, national or international level, which ensure that GM crops can only be grown where the sustainability assessment criteria, set out above, can be met.

Legal Accountability

Accountability for the consequences of releasing GM crops into the environment is unclear. It is important that legal responsibility is clearly traceable, and that the burden of responsibility lies with the producer of GM seed as well as with a farmer planting a GM crop. Accountability should be clearly defined.

The Trust believes that it is desirable that these basic requirements are met before any GM crop is grown commercially in the UK. No decision in principle has been taken by the Trust to seek to prevent GM crops being grown on all its land if the Government permits commercial cultivation. The Trust will rigorously examine relevant scientific evidence which emerges over the next few months, and listen to all sides of the public debate including the views of our farm tenants. Only when the Trust has scrutinised the evidence will a decision be taken, and on a case by case basis.