

UK Secretary of State Owen Paterson's speech on "Healthy food – the untold story of GM crops"

## **Introduction**

I am delighted to be speaking at this event that highlights the consumer benefits of GM technology.

As Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs in the UK, I have four priorities – growing the rural economy, improving the environment and safeguarding both plant and animal health. I firmly believe that the benefits of GM to farmers, consumers and the environment are an important part of achieving all of these objectives.

## **The current position**

The world's population already stands at over 7 billion, 1 billion of whom are hungry this morning. And this is predicted to reach over 9 billion by 2050. In order to feed a growing global population in an environmentally and economically sustainable manner, we need to be able to innovate and use all the tools available.

GM is one of these tools. It is being used more and more widely around the world. There's been a 100-fold increase in the global use of GM since 1996. The technology is now being employed by 17.3 million farmers in 28 countries on 170 million hectares, that's 12 per cent of the world's arable, which is an area around 7 times the size of the United Kingdom.

I've made my views about GM quite clear, but I think they are worth repeating. GM is not a panacea. It's not the only solution to the challenges we face. But the longer we ignore the potential contribution it can make, the harder it will be to meet those challenges successfully.

By continuing to ignore the evidence of the safe use of GM and its benefits, there is a real risk that we will deny ourselves access to the potential offered by new plant breeding techniques and other innovative technologies. This affects not only Europe but those parts of the world where agricultural innovation is desperately needed now.

Europe risks sending a message that we are anti-science and anti-innovation.

We are sending very mixed messages to industry and society. Without clarity industry will not invest in Europe.

European consumers already benefit hugely from GM technology. It's an integral part of our food supply network. We import and consume large volumes of GM material, particularly animal feed.

Yet, we won't approve new GM crops for cultivation.

Intellectual and commercial capacity in biotechnology is already leaving Europe. In a globalised and highly competitive food network, we simply can't afford for that to happen. We need to follow the science.

## Developments since Rothamsted Speech

Many of you will be aware of the speech I made on GM technology at Rothamsted last year. I'd like to briefly touch upon some developments that have occurred since then.

At the end of June, the European Academies Science Advisory Council issued a report warning of the grave scientific, economic, environmental and social consequences of current European Union policy towards GM crops. EASAC are an authoritative and independent voice. This report adds to the already considerable evidence on the benefits of GM.

The report draws a host of important conclusions. I'd like to quote four of them in particular:

- First, and I quote, “Biotechnology for crop improvement must be part of the response to societal challenges. The EU is falling behind new international competitors in agricultural innovation and this has implications for EU goals for science and innovation and the environment as well as for agriculture.”
- Second, and this is another quote, “There is no validated evidence that GM crops have greater adverse impact on health and the environment than any other technology used in plant breeding. There is compelling evidence that GM crops can contribute to sustainable development goals with benefits to farmers, consumers, the environment and the economy.”
- Thirdly: “the current slow and expensive regulatory situation surrounding GM crops in the EU encourages monopolies. It is important to explore ways to stimulate open innovation and reformulate the regulatory framework so as to encourage smaller companies and public sector activities.”
- And finally: “EU policy actions influence the developing world and the wider consequences need to be taken into account when deciding EU strategic options. There is evidence that attitudes to GM crops in the EU have created difficulties for scientists, farmers and politicians in Africa and elsewhere.”

There is a stark contrast between the division at a political level in the EU and the agreement between the 24 national science academies that produced this report. Those who still have reservations about the safety of GM crops should look at this report and the list of organisations that have put their name to it. The message from Europe's most eminent scientists is a clear one – GM technology is beneficial and safe.

In July, the UK Government published the first ever Agri-Tech Strategy. It sets out the need to improve our ability to translate our world class research into practical applications that will make us world leaders not only in agriculture but also in the science and technology that supports it. We have committed £160 million of which £70 million will help to commercialise new agricultural technologies and £90 million will establish world class Centres for Agricultural Innovation in the UK.

On 8 August, field trials of the vitamin A-enriched Golden Rice were vandalised in the Philippines. The trials were conducted by the Philippine Department of Agriculture, on behalf of the International Rice Research Institute, a non-profit independent research and training organisation. We've heard more about the Golden Rice project earlier this morning. It's a development we are following extremely closely. New technologies must be properly tested and researched so that decisions can then be taken on the basis of the evidence. While I acknowledge there are a range of political views on GM technology, I hope we would all agree that properly sanctioned scientific trials must be able to

progress without the threat of disruption or vandalism. Without evidence we cannot take robust decisions.

In October, on World Food Day, a worldwide organisation of public sector scientists joined a host of European Farmer organisations in writing to the President of the European Commission, the President of the European Council and the President of the European Parliament about the damaging consequences of the EU's stance towards GM. They called on the EU institutions and Member States to take a broader, more holistic, and longer term view on agricultural production of food, feed and biomass. They asked us to adjust our GMO policies and regulations accordingly.

In November, because of inconclusive results the infamous article linking GM crops to cancer in rats was retracted. The retraction received far less publicity than the initial launch of the study – but I hope it marks a turning point in the GM debate. GM policy must be driven by evidence and we need to get better at making the evidence accessible to the public.

And to bring us right up-to-date, there are ongoing discussions within the Council on whether or not to approve 1507 maize following an ECJ ruling last year. I hope this maize will be approved. I believe Europe has the most comprehensive safety-based system for examining GM crops in the world. This product has been in that system for well over a decade and has received six positive safety opinions from EFSA. Although the UK has no current interest in planting this particular crop, I think that farmers in Spain and other countries should be able to choose whether or not to grow it on practical grounds following the evidence rather than being blocked by Member States who do not have the pests, like the European corn borer, that this maize protects against.

On GM cultivation more broadly, it's no secret that I want there to be an end to the political deadlock in Europe. We must find a way of allowing fair and predictable market access for products that have passed the necessary safety assessments. Commissioner Borg has called for renewed discussions on the EU cultivation proposal. I'd like to echo the Commissioner's call.

The time is now ripe to see if we can break this 15-year deadlock on GM cultivation authorisations. A deadlock that has caused so much damage to Europe's scientific credibility and leaves us vulnerable to legal challenge. I hope the Greek Presidency will consider how progress might be made in the coming months.

### **Consumer benefits**

The focus of today's events on consumer benefits is particularly timely. The global success story of GM crops to date has been based around either herbicide tolerant or insect resistant crops. Most consumers don't understand the great benefits that these traits deliver. GM crops provide consumers with the benefit of an improved environment as well as more efficient farming. Last weekend I met the Canadian Agriculture Minister at Green Week in Berlin. He told me that Canadian farmers grew a record 11.6 million hectares of GM canola, corn, soybean and sugar beet in 2012.

Canada has estimated that the net economic benefit at the farm level of growing GM crops since 1996 is \$4 billion. Additionally, herbicide tolerant crops have facilitated the uptake of conservation tillage, and reduced fuel use, pesticide use and soil erosion. The Canadian experience of growing GM crops is truly impressive.

I make absolutely no apology for wanting European farmers and consumers to have access to the same advantages.

Consumers could also see more direct benefits, like the public health applications covered this morning - Gluten free wheat for coeliacs, high-oleic soy with a healthier oil profile, golden rice for tackling vitamin A deficiency in the developing world, in-built protection against a virus that can devastate cassava harvests in Africa, and a more sustainable source of Omega-3 oils from Camelina.

These traits could provide substantial benefits to a variety of consumers around the world, once they have passed the required safety assessments. These examples show what the technology can deliver. But what effect is the current political uncertainty in Europe having on other possible developments? What exciting, distant innovations remain trapped on laptops not even advancing to laboratories because researchers and developers see no route to market? How much longer can we afford to leave all this potential untapped?

EuropaBio, our hosts for this event, represent some of the larger global biotechnology companies. But this sector should be buzzing with small-scale, innovative enterprises developing and commercialising new exciting products.

One consequence of the political deadlock on GM in Europe is that only the large companies can afford to progress products through our regulatory system. Some commentators complain about the market dominance of a few large firms while simultaneously calling for regulatory requirements to be ratcheted up so that smaller firms are effectively excluded from that market.

### **Concluding Remarks**

We need to act now otherwise Europe is at serious risk of becoming the Museum of World Farming.

I was asked a few weeks ago about my views on “the GM experiment”. My answer was simple. GM is not an experiment. It has clearly been shown to be a safe, affordable, environmentally and economically beneficial technology. Over the last 15 years over 2 trillion meals with GM ingredients have been eaten without a single health incident. Some experiment!

Events such as this one are incredibly important. The communications challenge on GM technology is a difficult one. The ‘Growing Voices’ on GM will continue to grow as the technology continues to develop and deliver. With the right balance of political, industrial, media and scientific leadership, consumers and society will surely listen more to what those voices are saying and I’ll back you all the way!