

# Consumers, Food Producers and Retailers Say "No!" to Genetically Engineered Products

*"The latest survey shows an on-going collapse of public support for biotechnology and GM foods. At each point in this project, we keep thinking that we have reached the low point and that public thinking will stabilize, but we apparently have not reached that point."<sup>1</sup>*

These words are taken from an internal Monsanto memo following the corporation's disastrous £1 million advertising campaign in Britain in 1998. Public acceptance of GE foods in Germany had equally disappointing results for the company.

Neither Monsanto nor the handful of other multinational agrochemical companies who are behind the genetic engineering industry can have been particularly surprised by the scale of public opposition to the technology. Mounting and widespread public concern has been clearly demonstrated by numerous opinion polls throughout the world over the last few years.

The genetic engineering industry has a marked tendency to dismiss public concerns as 'emotional' and based on a lack of understanding of the technology. However, the evidence does not support this view. A comparison of the results of European surveys in 1991, 1993 and 1996, for instance, shows that knowledge about the technology and scepticism about its implementation have increased at the same time.<sup>2</sup> The 1996 results also demonstrated that 74% of the

European public support labelling of GE foods; 60% believe there should be public consultation about new developments; and just over half (53%) feel that current regulations are insufficient to protect people from the risks of the technology.

## Why is the public opposed to genetic engineering?

Public opposition derives from a complex set of concerns over the new technology and its products. These include:

- **Health.** People are becoming aware that there is a scientific basis to safety concerns about genetically engineered (GE) foods, and are reluctant to replace food they know to be safe with food that might not be. A lack of trust in official assurances of safety, exacerbated by the BSE crisis in the United Kingdom, has made people very suspicious of claims that there is no evidence of harm.
- **Environment.** There is growing evidence that genetic engineering poses new risks to ecosystems, with the potential to threaten biodiversity, wildlife and truly

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sustainable forms of agriculture (see Greenpeace Briefing: *“The End of the World As We Know It: The Environmental Costs of Genetic Engineering”*). According to the research, it is the potential for long-term effects which most concerns people. The public is rightfully concerned that once genetically modified organisms (GMOs) have been released into the environment, they may transfer their characteristics to other organisms and can never be recalled or contained.

- **Ethics.** For many people, the main issue is not whether GE food is safe or not, but the fact that it is unnatural and unnecessary. For some, it offends deeply held principles about the relationship between humanity and nature.
- **Politics.** International free-trade agreements are increasing the power of commercial interests and people are concerned that governments are being influenced by unelected bodies such as the World Trade organization, the WTO.
- **Profit.** Trade in seeds, food and crops is increasingly dominated by a handful of multinational corporations such as Monsanto, Novartis, Zeneca, Aventis (merger of Hoechst and Rhône Poulenc) and DuPont. It is widely believed that these are the only beneficiaries of GE crops and foods.

Given the extent and complexity of public concerns over genetic engineering, it is perfectly understandable that consumers should demand the right to avoid GE food. However, the failure to segregate GE and conventional food ingredients, together with inadequate labelling regulations, currently deprive them of this right to exercise free choice. (See Greenpeace Briefing: *“Segregation and*

*Labelling of Genetically Engineered Foods”*).

## Responses of food producers and retailers

Businesses involved in food production and retailing clearly cannot afford to ignore public opposition to GE foods since consumer rejection would inevitably lead to loss of profits. Consequently, many have already recognised the need to react. For instance:

- Most European food brands effectively avoid GE ingredients, even though some major companies still avoid clear commitments.
- Kraft Jacobs Suchard, the fourth largest food company in Europe, has said that for the foreseeable future all soya-based ingredients used in their products in Europe will only be derived from crops which do not contain GE material.
- Nestlé subsidiaries in the UK, France, Belgium, Germany, Austria, Italy and Hong Kong have declared they will not use GE ingredients.
- In the USA baby food producers Gerber and Heinz announced they would phase out GE in their products. In Canada food giant McCain announced that it will refuse to accept GE potatoes, citing consumer concerns.
- Seven major supermarket chains in the UK, Ireland, France, Belgium and Italy have announced an alliance to source GE-free supplies and have committed themselves not to use GE foods in their own brands.
- All Austrian supermarket chains have declared they will not sell GE food in their outlets. Together with producers, farmers and NGOs, a

working group "without genetic engineering" has been established.

- Iceland Frozen Foods - a leading British supermarket chain - announced in 1998 that its own-brand products would no longer contain *any* GE ingredients, including derivatives such as oil and lecithin.

Such corporate responses to public opinion are in direct contrast to the attitudes of many of the world's governments and regulatory authorities.

## Government responses to public opposition

The failure of many governments to control the introduction of GE crops and foods has highlighted a serious discrepancy between policy and public concern. With few exceptions, governments of industrialised nations have been keen to support the genetic engineering industry. Such support is often justified by repeating the industry's own propaganda regarding perceived advantages for employment and competitiveness.

Despite the growing intensity of public opposition, measures to assess the environmental and health risks remain disturbingly lax. Similarly, little has been done to meet public demands for the segregation of GE and non-GE foods or meaningful labelling regulations.

In their defence, governments often claim that banning the importation of GE foods would breach free trade agreements and could provoke the imposition of trade sanctions by the World Trade Organisation.

There are signs, however, that some governments are at last beginning to take notice of their electorates' views on genetic engineering. This has

resulted in a number of actions to limit its introduction, especially in some of the member states of the European Union. For example:

- **Austria and Luxembourg**, citing Article 16 of the Deliberate Release Directive (90/220/EC), have banned the commercial growing or other uses of Novartis' insect and herbicide resistant maize.
- **Greece** has banned the import of an AgrEvo herbicide resistant oilseed rape.
- **France** has introduced a two year moratorium on the commercial use of GE oilseed rape and sugar beet. Two varieties of GE oilseed rape which had already been given approval for importation and seed production have been banned. Following a legal case brought by Greenpeace and others, France's Conseil d'Etat has withdrawn approval for growing Novartis's insect resistant maize.
- **Norway** has banned all GMOs containing antibiotic resistance markers.
- The majority of **EU environment ministers** agreed in June 1999 to a de-facto moratorium on new market approvals for GE crops.
- **Brazil**, the world's second biggest soybean exporter, has still not approved the growing of Monsanto's GE soya. The Governor of Rio Grande del Sul, the biggest Brazilian soybean state, has declared the state a "GMO free zone". Other Brazilian states are considering similar action to guarantee their products remain GMO free.
- In January 2000 **over 130 countries** adopted international rules to control and safeguard the environment against GMOs, in the so-called biosafety protocol.

## Can we avoid eating GE foods?

Although certain governments, food producers and retailers are beginning to make concessions to public opinion, there is certainly no room for complacency. Applications to grow GE crops commercially continue to be approved in countries throughout the world, and GE foods for human and animal consumption are still being exported on an enormous scale.

Failure to segregate GE from conventional food ingredients and the lack of adequate labelling regulations mean that it is difficult for consumers to maintain a GE-free diet. In fact, one of the few ways to entirely avoid GE products is to buy only organic foods. Under present regulations, these are guaranteed not to include any GE ingredients. However, because of the lack of investment in organic systems and lack of accounting for the environmental and other costs of conventional agriculture in food prices, organic produce is relatively expensive. Avoiding GE foods may therefore become a choice which is denied to people on low incomes.

## Conclusion

Although the genetic engineering industry - and its political supporters - persistently bombard the public with propaganda extolling the alleged virtues of their products, people have become increasingly aware of the potential risks to the environment and human and animal health. Many are equally concerned about the moral and ethical issues involved. However, unless public pressure is maintained - indeed, strengthened - we will continue to be the guinea pigs in a grossly unnatural and potentially disastrous experiment:

- **Demand GE-free food.** Ask your supermarket manager to guarantee that foods on sale do not contain GE ingredients.
- **Write to the main food producers.** (Unilever, Nestlé, Danone, etc). Demand GE-free foods.
- **Write to your MP and MEP.** Demand that your government bans imports of GE foodstuffs and the growing of GE crops in your country.
- **Oppose** commercial and experimental planting of GE plants or releases of GE bacteria and animals in your neighbourhood, community, region or country. Insist on your democratic right to influence political decisions about your environment.
- **Support** organic farmers and other farmers who actively oppose the release of GMOs into the environment. Point out to farmers who are thinking of growing GE crops that they may be producing something which few people will want to buy.
- **Write to the genetic engineering companies** (Monsanto, Novartis, Hoechst, Rhône-Poulenc, AgrEvo, DuPont, Pioneer, Zeneca, Empresas las Modernas, etc) and let them know you will not tolerate their global experiment with nature.

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## References

- 1 Monsanto document from Stan Greenberg 'The British Test'. 5th October 1998.
- 2 Biotechnology and the European Public Concerted Action Group (1997), Europe ambivalent on biotechnology. Nature 387: 845-847.