

DINNER/DISCUSSION SUMMARY

The GM Debate – The Outcome of the Public Dialogue

Held at The Natural History Museum on Tuesday 28th October 2003

Sponsored by
Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council
Natural Environment Research Council
Natural History Museum

In the Chair: **The Rt Hon the Lord Jenkin of Roding**
Chairman, The Foundation for Science and Technology

Speakers: **Professor Howard Dalton, FRS**
Chief Scientific Adviser, Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs
Ian Coates
Strategy Unit, Cabinet Office
Professor Malcolm Grant CBE
Chair, Public Consultation on GM and Provost, University College London

The invited speakers described the processes adopted for the reviews of the science and economics of genetically modified crops and for the public debate.

In discussion it was asked how far the engagement of the press had improved the public debate or undermined its quality. The answer offered was that it varied from newspaper to newspaper, some being partisan, and also depended on which correspondent covered the topic. There had been some spectacularly good journalism, but it had also sometimes been shoddy and superficial.

A speaker warned against underrating public opinion. Most people were more open-minded than the press suggested and did not buy the "Frankenstein Foods" line. At the same time there did not appear to be a silent majority in favour of GM foods. Another speaker saw evidence of polarised opinions, together with some "don't knows" and others who did not want to know and preferred to let the Government decide - a very dangerous attitude.

There were different views on the quality of discussion in the public meetings. One person complained of a baying mob of activists and debates where the facts were not forthcoming and few young scientists cared to take part.

There was a problem in getting the right information to the public. Others agreed that some meetings in the early stages of the public debate had been hijacked but considered that, as experience was gained in running the proceedings, there had been some excellent discussions. The participants wanted a voice which was otherwise denied them. There was evidence that the US Government was impressed by the way that its counterpart in the UK had engaged in public debate before making policy (and possibly thought this an unwise thing to do). It was suggested mischievously that the same process might be applied to the teaching of creationist doctrines in American schools.

The economic review carried out by the Cabinet Office Strategy Unit pointed to a case-by-case approach to different applications of GM technology rather than a fixed policy. It was argued that such an approach would in any event be necessary because of the power of the till, in that the Government had to take account of what the public would buy. A speaker suggested also that the anxiety might be less about the technology than about the particular genes which were modified.

Not everyone agreed that case-by-case evaluation was the way forward. One speaker wondered whether it was appropriate in a complex

ecosystem. Another thought there could indeed be an overall approach. Listening to the market and responding to what people wanted was itself a policy, and there were other options. Another participant wondered who would bear the costs of case by case assessment. Food was not the kind of high value-added commodity that could support expensive regulation. In response it was suggested that the public interest in proper regulation could justify an element of public funding, but that the industry should also contribute so that there was an incentive not to push an application through the regulatory system unless it was worth it.

The question was raised, indeed, whether there was any advantage in pursuing the technology, given that so few GM crops would ever be grown in the UK. One response to this came from a plant pathologist who observed that food was subject to attack by eleven different types of competing organisms. Their importance should not be underrated, given that potato blight had reduced the population of Ireland by a quarter in the 19th century. Various techniques involving genetic modification would help to keep plant pathogens at bay. It was also noted that the current debate was all about herbicide resistance, whereas resistance to frost and salt were much more important worldwide. In The Gambia people were starving for want of rice crops that would grow in brackish water. The UK in any case had to recognise that whatever it decided there would be other countries such as Brazil growing GM crops on a large scale.

In his talk Mr Coates raised the question of what people expected of farmers. One member of that profession returned to that in the discussion, pointing out that if it was wrong to kill weeds that knocked on the head what he had been doing for the last twenty years. One response to this was that sustainable farming meant making a profit, so if killing weeds would achieve that it was the way to go. Part of the point of glyphosate-tolerant crops was to reduce the amount of herbicide needed, and that meant more profit. Against this it was argued that profit was not everything: the land should be kept in good heart and be passed on.

As the discussion drew to an end one participant thought it remarkable that it had focussed politely on the procedure for making sure that the Government was aware of public opinion on GM crops, without anyone asking how the Government would respond. The elaborate process had led a large number of people to

believe that nothing had been decided and that their views would make a difference. In the speaker's view the way to consult the public was through elections.

In conclusion it was suggested that the current debate had come far too late. The UK had to get ahead of the game, and leadership was needed even in a democracy. Sometimes actions had unintended beneficial consequences, and the farm-scale evaluation trials were a case in point. The results had shown that variability between different crops and crop management methods in their effects on biodiversity mattered more than whether they were genetically modified or not. It was to be hoped that the GM debate would feed into more important issues about land management in the UK and its impact on wildlife. In the meanwhile the Government had been put in a good position to make informed decisions on GM crops.

Mr Jeff Gill

Background Information

www.gmsciencedebate.org.uk
www.number-10.gov.uk/su/gm/index.htm
www.gmpublicdebate.org
www.defra.gov.uk/environment/gm/index.htm
www.royalsoc.ac.uk/gmplants

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