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Abstract

Genetically modified organisms: The view of a consumer organisation

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It is difficult to think of a food issue that has caused as much consumer outrage as the introduction of genetically modified (GM) foods into Europe. Before consumers were given the opportunity to have a say over the role that the technology could play in food production, North American GM soya and maize arrived on the European market mixed in with conventional varieties. Since then, legislation has tried to keep pace with developments in the food supply chain.

CA has been tracking consumer attitudes to GM for several years - since the vegetarian cheese made using chymosin first came onto the market in 1994. From a consumer perspective, the issues raised by GM largely relate to consumer safety and consumer choice. It is concern that neither of these aspects have been adequately addressed that has fuelled consumer resistance to GM products. Many consumers are concerned about the long-term safety implications of GM, and the ethical aspects. It goes to the heart of current debates about the role of science, how to deal with scientific uncertainty, and the role of other socio-cultural factors. It has also brought home to consumers just how globalised the food supply has become, and how little control they may ultimately have over what they eat.

Our most recent survey (May 2002) found that less than a third (32 per cent) found the idea of food produced from a GM plant acceptable. The use of GM bacteria (for example to produce vitamins) or yeast was acceptable to 30 per cent. GM animals and fish were unsurprisingly the least acceptable with only 11 and 13 per cent respectively saying that they would accept them.

Overall, 57 per cent of those we spoke to said they had concerns about the use of GM in food production. One of the top spontaneous concerns was a lack of information or a feeling that 'I don't know enough about it'. There was also concern that we should not tamper with nature, that not enough research had been done, that it wasn't natural, concerns about effects on health, long-term effects in general, possible side-effects, the risk of contamination or effect on other crops and the impact on animals or wildlife.

Sixty four per cent of consumers said that they were concerned that they could still be eating GM ingredients without knowing about it.

Many consumers still had an open mind about the possible benefits of GM. Half of respondents thought that GM could offer benefits for food production, but at the moment those developing the technology are seen to benefit most - with GM seen as offering least benefits for consumers.

Many retailers, manufacturers and caterers have responded to these concerns by sourcing non-GM supplies and therefore providing choice. A survey carried out by CA showed that from the information companies provided us with, there is however some variation of approach. While most include derivatives, such as soya oil and lecithin, as part of their identity preservation (IP) schemes, some base their policy on current EU labelling requirements and only exclude those ingredients that are not detectable. Some are exploring the possibility of excluding GM ingredients from animal feed, while others already claim to have achieved this for specific product ranges. Although GM processing aids are widely used in the food industry, these are generally not included, although some companies did state that they were not using GM processing aids or enzymes.

Legislation has been slow to respond to GM developments, although the proposed legislation on GM food and feed and labelling and traceability will address many consumer concerns - particularly the requirement to extend labelling to all GM derivatives.

However, it still remains unclear how consumer attitudes towards GM will be taken into account as part of the proposed approval process. This is particularly pertinent given continuing threats by the US to take the issue to the World Trade Organisation. Any such challenge would be extremely short-sighted and only likely to compound consumer resistance. Our food industry survey also showed a lack of willingness by manufacturers, caterers and retailers to use GM ingredients until there is a change in consumer attitudes.

The number of GM crops on the market has so far been limited - and as a result of the actions by the food industry and limitations to labelling requirements, it is easy for consumers to assume that GM has gone away. However, many more products are under development, involving more complex modifications and with the potential to raise more safety issues. The ethical dimension is also likely to become much starker with GM fish and animals being developed - and an application for a type of salmon that grows faster is already pending in the US.

In the UK - but also across Europe - there is also the possibility that GM crops could soon be grown commercially. In the UK, a decision is likely this Autumn, taking into account the results of farm-scale evaluations, a review of the science relating to GM, a review of the costs and benefits of GM crops - and possibly the results of a promised public debate (although the government has yet to make a firm commitment to this).

It is CA's view that this is premature - and that consumer concerns need to be dealt with before any more GM products come onto the market or crops are grown commercially. The main issues that need to be addressed first are:

- an effective and meaningful public debate;
- effective consideration of consumer concerns, including the potential risks and benefits of a particular application as part of the approval process;
- more open, transparent and inclusive regulatory processes;
- mechanisms for monitoring the long-term consequences of GM for human health and the environment;
- more independent research into the long-term consequences of GM;

- better mechanisms for picking up unintended effects as a result of the modification;
- full traceability of GMOs in place - in order to track GM developments and know where GM ingredients are used; and
- GM ingredients must be properly labelled based on what is used rather than what is detectable in the end product, alternatives to GM products must be available and all labelling rules effectively enforced.