

Chief Scientific Adviser highlights the sharp divergence between the scientific evidence and public perceptions of GM foods

Ireland should take the lead in conducting research on the issue.

Friday September 14th: Scientific research to date has uncovered no significant negative health effects from GM foods, despite ongoing public concern that such foods maybe harmful, the Chief Scientific Adviser to the Government Professor Patrick Cunningham said today.

Speaking at the National Conference of the Agricultural Science Association in Trim, Professor Cunningham, said: "Repeated surveys show that over 70 per cent of European citizens are against Genetically Modified (GM) food. This reality cannot be ignored. At the same time, the scientific evidence overwhelmingly shows that food derived from GM crops, or from animals fed on GM feeds, is safe.

"GM crops and GM foods continue to be one of the most contentious public issues in European society", said Prof Cunningham. "While there are obvious technical and economic benefits, there is widespread apprehension about the technology due to concerns over the perceived risk to human health, environmental impact, potential to increase the power of multinational corporations, deterioration in food quality, threat to traditional farming and rural society, and general moral acceptability."

He noted the contrast between scientific and public opinion: "Three key sources of scientific research results in relation to GM foods are the Royal Society (UK), the Academie des Sciences (France) and the National Research Council (USA). All of these have concluded that GM foods are safe. However a Eurobarometer survey of 2003 showed that 56 per cent of Europeans believe GM foods to be dangerous, 70 per cent 'do not want this type of food' and 95 per cent want labelling and the right to choose.

"While scientific research has not uncovered any health impact, very little of the literature actually deals with health effects. Most of the published research on GM - over 30,000 papers - concerns development of the technology with less than 1 per cent dealing with health aspects.". Furthermore, no research on safety aspects of GM has yet been conducted in Ireland.

"We could take a lead in Europe by commissioning additional research to address this. Professor Cunningham pointed out that we already have in place a framework to support such scientific research, the Food Institutional Research Measure (FIRM). FIRM is the primary national funding mechanism for food research in third level colleges and Teagasc food research centres. Ireland is working to become a European leader in scientific research, and this area offers an excellent opportunity to provide a valuable service to the Irish and European public on an issue of real public concern."

Referring to the idea that Ireland be declared GM-free, he said: "This could possibly have advantages in marketing the €8bn of food products that we export."

"However, in order to realise this objective, a number of formidable challenges would have to be overcome. The first is that, as Austria and Italy have found, declaring a region GM free may conflict with EU rules permitting authorised GM varieties to be grown. The second is that, with effectively open borders between North and South, it would require a declaration in two jurisdictions. And the third is that with GM corn and soybean constituting a growing proportion of global supplies of these two crops, and with Ireland needing to import some two million tonnes per annum of such feed grains for its pig, poultry and dairy sectors, it will be increasingly difficult to source a GM-free feed supply."

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