House of Commons

Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee

GENETICALLY MODIFIED ORGANISMS

GOVERNMENT'S REPLY to the Committee's Fifth Report of Session 2001-02

Eighth Special Report of Session 2001–02

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EIGHTH SPECIAL REPORT

The Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee has agreed to the following Special Report:

GENETICALLY MODIFIED ORGANISMS: GOVERNMENT'S REPLY TO THE COMMITTEE'S FIFTH REPORT OF SESSION 2001-02

The Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee reported to the House on *Genetically Modified Organisms* in its Fifth Report of Session 2001-02, published on 18 June 2002 as HC 767. The Government's Reply to the Report was received on 30 September 2002 and is appended.

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APPENDIX

Introduction

1. The Government welcomes this report, which follows up on the Agriculture Committee's Report of July 2000 on Genetically Modified Organisms and Seed Segregation. The report addresses issues relating to the current programme of farm-scale evaluations of GM crops and the proposed public debate - what it might set out to achieve, and what are its chances of success. The Government agrees with the recommendations and conclusions of the committee. The committee set out 14 recommendations. These are given below in bold, with the Government response following.

Openness, transparency and responsibility

Paragraph 11: We urge those in favour of GM crops and those opposed to approach debate on the subject in as responsible and open-minded a manner as possible. In particular we urge them to base their arguments on rigorous science, rather than conjecture.
Paragraph 15: The media has an important role to play in informing the public about the complex issues surrounding GM food and crops. We urge all parts of the media to address those issues in future in a rational and constructive matter - their commitment to doing so is a prerequisite of a well-informed public debate.

2. The Government shares the Committee's view that debate on GM issues should be informed, and supports the Committee's request for rational and constructive involvement from all parties. Following advice from the Agriculture and Environment Biotechnology Commission (AEBC), the Government announced on 26 July that a public debate will start in autumn 2002. The overall programme of dialogue will involve a public debate and two related strands looking at the economics and science of GM. There will be throughout a two-way interaction between the three components. Outputs from both the science and economics components will feed into the public debate. Equally, issues emerging from the public debate should help frame the direction of the technical work.

Paragraph 17: We commend the AEBC for the transparency to which it has committed itself. All those involved in supporting or opposing the use of GM technologies, or who are otherwise engaged in the public debate about the issues surrounding GM food and crops, would do well to heed the example set by the Commission since its inception.

3. Government agrees that the AEBC has established a reputation for the independence of its judgement and the transparency of its processes. For this reason, the Government is looking to the AEBC to play a major role in ensuring that the public debate is run on the basis of independence, openness and integrity.

The public debate

Paragraph 19: We support the proposed public debate about the issues surrounding the outcome of the farm-scale evaluations and the future commercial growing of GM crops. However, we caution that the most optimistic aspirations for such a debate - that through it a clearer public consensus in favour or opposed to commercial planting will be formed - are unlikely to be fulfilled. The debate will, though, help to inform those members of the public who become aware of it about GM crops in a rational and intelligent way, and at the same time help the Government to understand public opinion rather better.

Paragraph 26: The public debate will not establish whether or not public opinion has swung for all time in favour or against the commercial planting of GM crops, and may not even give a clear view of the state of public opinion. The value of the exercise may, as we have suggested, lie in the process itself, which will help to inform the public, at least give a flavour of the variety of opinions held, and offer at least a framework for involvement.

4. The Government welcomes the Committee's support for the public debate, and shares its caution and the modesty of its aspirations. In its response to the AEBC's advice, the Government set out the following terms of reference for the overall programme:

* To identify, using methods which focus on grass roots opinion, the questions which the public has about GM issues, avoiding as far as possible the polarisation that has characterised so much of the discussion to date, and getting to the heart of the issues;

* To develop, from this framing of the issues and through a wholly open process, the provision of comprehensive evidence-based information to the public on scientific, economic and other aspects of GM;

* To provide people with the opportunity to debate the issues openly and to reach their own informed judgements on this subject;

* To provide information to government on how questions raised by the public have shaped the course of the debate, including on the scientific, economic and other aspects of GM.

Paragraph 22: We agree that public mistrust of [the Government's] intentions in respect of GM crops and food requires that the programme of public debate should be conducted independently of Government. The approach proposed by the AEBC

appears likely to keep the process at arm's length from the Government, and we therefore commend it.

5. The Government has accepted the AEBC recommendation for a steering board, independent of Government, to oversee the public debate. The Government has invited the AEBC chair, Professor Malcolm Grant, to chair the steering board and to appoint members, with regard to the need to maintain diversity and to have a balance of views and perspectives. The Government proposed that the board might include members drawn from the biotechnology industry, the health professions and consumers' organisations, as well as individuals involved in the scientific and economic research. Board members may be from AEBC or from elsewhere.

Independent science

Paragraph 23: It should be stressed that comparative models of change are required. Conventional British agriculture has not stood still and its evolution has had profound effects on our environment, our landscape, even arguably on our health. Analyses of GM technology must compare potential change from that source with predictable change as a result of conventional farming.

6. The science component of the overall dialogue programme will review the scientific issues relating to GM. It will consider the possible impacts of GM technology against the background of the existing agricultural landscape. New research into comparative costs and benefits of different farming systems is underway including a project let in response to the AEBC's specific recommendations. The project is entitled "A review of research into the environmental and socio-economic impacts of contemporary and alternative arable cropping systems". The project is due for completion in December 2002. The report will be made publicly available on the web, as a contribution to the debate.

Paragraph 24: Whilst we welcome the assessment of the science surrounding GM to be carried out by the Government's scientific advisers, we urge the Government to go further in order to buttress public confidence in the science underpinning the debate. We recommend that the Government not only adopt the recommendations made by the AEBC about the provision of independently-reviewed data and of public funds for future research, but also consider establishing a panel of scientists able to provide advice which is seen to be unbiased to inform the public debate.

Paragraph 34: No consensus is emerging from the scientific research undertaken into the environmental impact and safety of GM food and crops - at least not one sufficiently robust to refute the claims of those opposed to the technology, although we note the comment made to us by SCIMAC that gene flow in plants has been going on for centuries; we also note the conclusions of the Royal Society that consuming GM food poses no significant threat to human health. What is needed for the sake of the public debate is that efforts be made to reach agreement on even the simplest points of science. We reiterate our recommendation that Government should take steps to ensure that scientific research is carried out and made available to inform the public debate, and that research should be assessed by the panel of scientists we have recommended, and their views also disseminated.

7. The science review component of the public dialogue aims to allow ready access to scientific evidence concerning GMOs, including the potential introduction of commercially

grown GM crops to the UK; to allow access to the opinions of a variety of people and organisations on the scientific evidence; and, to allow the concerns of the public to drive the review and for members of the public to contribute and participate.

8. The science debate will centre around reviews of particular scientific topics, as indicated by public interest and concern. Members of the public with scientific views and the scientific community will be invited to comment and to ask questions. Experts with interests in subjects relevant to GM science and technology will be invited to contribute material so that various scientific views can be heard. Once particular areas of concern are identified scientific meetings open to the public will be arranged. The outcomes of these meetings, including any consensus reached, will be published on the web. As part of the science review the results of the science debate will be drawn together in summaries on each issue.

9. The review will identify areas of consensus, disagreement, and of uncertainty in the scientific issues surrounding genetic modification. A panel of scientists representing the range of issues debated will be formed to guide the direction of the debate and to draw together the conclusions. A review panel, consisting of academics, social scientists, and lay people representing a range of views on GMs, will provide advice. The final review documents will be the responsibility of the Government's Chief Scientific Adviser, Professor David King, the Chief Scientific Adviser to the Secretary of State for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, Professor Howard Dalton, and the Food Standards Agency.

10. DEFRA and the FSA have research programmes to identify unresolved GM science issues, as advised by the Advisory Committee on Releases to the Environment (ACRE). The programmes include projects researching the transfer and survival of DNA in the bacteria of the human gut, gene-flow from GM plants, the Farm Scale Evaluations and a review of research into the impacts of different farming systems. The results of these projects are made publicly available, and so will contribute to the science debate.

Paragraph 27: We recommend as a matter of priority that the Government address the question of the need to rebuild public confidence in science as an instrument of public policy, without which it will be extremely difficult to have a well informed public consultation and debate on matters such as the future of GM technology.

11. The Government is determined to restore levels of public trust and confidence in the handling of science by listening to people's opinions and concerns. Promoting openness on matters relating to science and technology is a priority for Government. Many departments provide detailed information about their science and innovation strategies, research activities and outputs on their websites, and consult widely on their research programmes.

12. The first step to having a fruitful and constructive dialogue with the public is to seek their views. The Office of Science and Technology in the Department of Trade and Industry commissioned with the Wellcome Trust a major survey of public attitudes to science and technology.

13. The results of the survey, published in 2000, are providing a valuable tool to help us to develop the dialogue between the science community and the wider public that the Committee's report recommends. They also set the benchmark against which we must measure ourselves in the future. For example the surveys show that the British public has

a positive attitude to science - 8 out of 10 agree that Britain needs to develop science and technology to enhance its international competitiveness, two-thirds of people think that scientists want to make life better for the average person and a similar proportion agree that scientists should listen more to what ordinary people think.

14. The Government believes that public trust is vital to progress and innovation and that we must take note of people's concerns, but not exaggerate them. It is therefore important that we establish and maintain public confidence in the governance of science and achieve societal acceptance of new technologies. The Prime Minister in his speech to the Royal Society on 23 May spoke of encouraging openness, transparency and honesty into how decisions on science are taken. He commended the work of the Human Genetics Commission and Agriculture and Environment Biotechnology Commission in involving the public in the social and ethical discussion surrounding scientific research.

15. The Government is committed to improving the way it obtains advice and communicates developments in science and science policy. The Office of Science and Technology promotes Guidelines 2000 as best practice for government departments' use of scientific advice in policy making and has published a Code of Practice for Scientific

Advisory Committees.

16. We want to move towards a more inclusive dialogue between Government, scientists and the public about science and the issues that it raises for society. As well as improving public understanding of science, it is important for scientists and decision-makers to understand the public, and listen to their views on the implications of the development of that science. Without this mutual understanding, there will be no productive dialogue.

Farm-scale evaluations

Paragraph 36: The farm-scale evaluations are important, but they will answer only a very limited number of questions. As we have said, further independently-conducted and independently-assessed research will be needed in order to inform the public debate.

Paragraph 38: It is unfortunate that the crops chosen for use in the farm-scale evaluations are not directly used by consumers. Debate about the farm-scale evaluations is therefore likely to focus on alleged risks associated with GM technology without the balance of any concrete examples of substantial consumer benefits. As a result the public, looking at the outcomes of the farm-scale evaluations alone, is unlikely to perceive much advantage in proceeding to commercial exploitation of GM crops. This ensures that the debate will be about principles and hypotheses not concrete consumer-relevant United Kingdom data, making it all the harder to involve the wider public.

17. The Government recognises that the Farm Scale Evaluations are a limited study. The debate announced by the Government will be about the wider issues of GM, including GM crops. The science strand of the debate will include discussion of the Farm Scale Evaluations but will be in no way limited to it.

General conclusions

Paragraph 39: The public debate about GM crops and food proposed by the AEBC is an innovative and sensible means of attempting to understand public feelings about such a complicated issue. At the very least the debate will provide a platform through which the quality of public knowledge will be raised, particularly if the Government commits itself to providing not only the already-commissioned assessment of the science by its own advisers but also the independently-conducted and independently-evaluated research we have recommended, and the debate will also provide a forum through which the public can air its views.

18. The Government sees the programme of debate proposed by AEBC as bold and innovative. The Government shares AEBC's analysis that the public debate will help deepen public understanding of all the issues surrounding GM. If there are gaps and uncertainties in knowledge these need to be ascertained, acknowledged and addressed. The debate will be an important example of public participation in discussion of scientific issues.

Paragraph 40: To give approval for commercial planting of GM crops the Government will have to act within the legal framework of the European Union. Thus the public debate will inform decisions made in the United Kingdom; it can also, as the AEBC proposes, help to inform the attitude of the United Kingdom Government in European deliberations on these matters. In the end, however, decisions about commercial exploitation of GM crops will be decided by our legal obligations within the Union and, potentially, in due course within the World Trade Organisation. In setting the framework for the public debate, the Government should, nonetheless, make clear the importance of the United Kingdom's international obligations.

19. The Government agrees with the Committee's recommendation that the Government should make clear the legal framework within which decisions on commercialisation of GM crops will be taken. AEBC's advice on the debate acknowledged that it is Ministers who will make the decisions, in the context of European law, international developments and in the light of other factors. The decision-making process on the possible commercialisation of GM crops will be based on an objective assessment of all the available evidence including the Farm Scale Evaluations, other scientific evidence and information about the costs and benefits to the UK.

Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs
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