



House of Commons
Environment, Food and Rural
Affairs Committee

**Conduct of the GM
Public Debate:
Government Reply to
the Committee's
Report**

Fifth Special Report

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The Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee

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FIFTH SPECIAL REPORT

The Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee reported to the House on *Conduct of the GM Public Debate* in its Eighteenth Report of Session 2002–03, published on 20 November 2003 as HC 1220. The Government's Reply to the Report was received on 9 March 2004.

Government response

Introduction

The Government welcomes this opportunity to respond to the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Select Committee's conclusions and recommendations regarding the conduct of the GM public debate.

In May 2002 the Government accepted a recommendation by the Agriculture and Environment Biotechnology Commission (AEBC) to hold a public debate on GM. The debate was jointly sponsored and co-funded by Defra and the Devolved Administrations in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, with additional funding from DTI. An independent Steering Board (PDSB) was set up to carry out the further work that was then needed to design and deliver the debate programme. The main debate activities were finally held during June and July 2003, and the Steering Board submitted its report to Government in September. The debate was one strand of a wider 'GM Dialogue', which also included a science review and a study of the costs and benefits of GM crops.

Overall we believe that the public debate was a qualified success, and we do not share the Committee's view that it was 'an opportunity missed'. Nor do we accept that its successes were outweighed by its shortcomings. The debate was an innovative attempt to engage the public in a complex policy issue. It was not instigated by Government, nor did government see it—as has been alleged—as an attempt to change public opinion. Its aim was to get a clear indication of the range of people's views on GM, though it clearly had a role in informing and raising awareness. Thousands of people participated by attending public meetings, visiting the website and sending letters and emails. By any standards that is a remarkable achievement.

Nevertheless we acknowledge the importance of identifying any lessons learned from the debate process to help inform any future exercises in public engagement, whether these are conducted by Defra, other Government Departments or other organisations. We have set out below our response to the Committee's specific conclusions and recommendations. Our response to the public debate will be published shortly, and will explain how the debate has informed the policy-making process.

Recommendation 1

Underpinning the public debate was the laudable aim of engaging the public in policy-making about a controversial issue. Launching the public debate was imaginative and innovative. Many people did engage with the debate, and, even if the views of a large proportion were unshakeable, giving them the opportunity to air their opinions in a formal setting was worthwhile. Any criticism that we make elsewhere in this report of the conduct of the debate must be seen in that context. (Paragraph 10)

We welcome and share the Committee's conclusion that the public debate was worthwhile. The debate was a genuinely innovative activity, and Government took a number of risks, including by appointing an independent Steering Board to manage the process. The Steering Board's report concludes that the debate was a qualified success and that it was clearly welcomed and valued by the public. Nevertheless it was a learning process for all involved—Government, the Steering Board and the Central Office of Information (COI).

Recommendation 2

The work conducted in the 'narrow-but-deep' groups was valuable, and its outcomes very interesting. We commend the PDSB for commissioning the groups. Any criticism that we make of the debate in this report does not extend to the 'narrow-but-deep' work. (Paragraph 12)

We agree that the 'narrow-but-deep' groups were an important part of the debate process, and served as an important 'control' on the open debate process. We will comment further on the differences between the views of the 'narrow but deep' element and the 'self-selecting' participants in our separate response to the public debate report.

Recommendations 3 and 5

It is not clear why the Government did not accede to the AEBC's original timetable for the debate or why, once it became clear that the science and economic reviews and the FSE results would not be available to inform the debate, it did not set a later deadline for the PDSB's report. (Paragraph 15)

The fact that the debate was not informed by the outcomes of the economic and scientific reviews, nor by the results of the FSEs, is highly regrettable. Without this information – some of which was commissioned specifically to inform the debate – the likelihood that the wider 'public' would be informed about GM as a result of the debate was much reduced. We recommend that the Government now explain why the deadline for the debate was such that the two reviews and the FSEs could not be used to inform the process, and why, once it became clear that the debate would end too soon, the Government did not ask the PDSB to extend it. (Paragraph 28)

The GM public debate was announced in May 2002. It was envisaged that the Steering Board would submit their report to Government in June 2003. It was already known that there was no question of the full set of peer-reviewed farm scale evaluation (FSE) results being available before the autumn at the earliest. Indeed the final results are not yet available.

The Government's view has always been that the FSE results, while important in themselves, were not central to the public debate. The reason for this is that the FSEs were looking at a single narrow question (i.e. whether the management of GM herbicide-tolerant crops would have an adverse effect on farmland biodiversity), whereas the public debate was not intended to focus exclusively on GM crops. The Government wanted to give the public the opportunity to debate the broader questions and concerns that they have about GM. Indeed the report of the public debate has helped to put the FSE results into context, as it is clear that people's concerns about GM crops are driven by a complex range of issues. It is also important to bear in mind that the FSEs were effectively looking at the effects of herbicide use, and therefore are only directly relevant to the assessment specifically of the environmental impact of GM herbicide-tolerant crops.

Our intention was always that the science review and the costs and benefits study, the other two of the three strands, would proceed in parallel with the public debate, and that they would report at around the same time. It was envisaged that there would be interaction between the three strands, though in practice there was not as much as we had hoped. The Foundation Workshops commissioned by the public debate Steering Board helped to frame the issues for all three strands of the GM dialogue. The Strategy Unit and Science Review also adopted an open and transparent approach to their work, inviting comments via their websites and, in the case of the Science Review, by holding open meetings.

The AEBC recommended that there should be a public debate before decisions had to be taken on the possible commercialisation of GM crops. Decisions to approve GM crops for cultivation are taken collectively by EU member states. There is clearly scope for the Government to influence EU decisions, but we do not control the timetable for EU decision-making. Early in 2003 the European Commission was signalling that the EU approvals process could restart as early as October.

The Government therefore anticipated that we might need to take a view on whether specific crops should be approved for commercial cultivation as early as October 2003. In line with the AEBC's advice, we wanted to ensure that we were in a position to make informed decisions—and that meant having at our disposal not only the findings of the public debate, but also those of the science and economic strands, and the FSE results. If we had further extended the deadline for the Steering Board's report, then decisions to approve GM crops for commercial cultivation could have been scheduled at EU level before we had had chance to consider the findings of all three strands of the public

dialogue. This would clearly have been unacceptable. Our view remains that the decisions we took on timing were appropriate.

Recommendation 4

Whether or not the performance of the COI significantly affected the conduct of the debate, given the criticism surrounding its appointment it is unfortunate that the PDSB was not able to at least consider other contractors. The fact that it was not able to do so is the direct result of the constraints placed on the PDSB by Government – principally, in this case, the deadline set for completion of the debate. Those constraints meant that the PDSB was perhaps not able to appoint the best contractor, and the perceived independence of the debate was jeopardised. (Paragraph 26)

We have explained above the time constraints which affected the timetable for the debate. The Steering Board decided that appointing COI as their prime contractor would enable them to proceed more quickly. However, we do accept that if more time had been available, it might have been preferable to invite other companies or consortia to bid for the work.

We do not accept that the appointment of COI jeopardized the perceived independence of the debate. It is generally accepted that the debate was indeed run independently of Government and that the involvement of COI did not compromise the Steering Board's independence in any way.

Recommendations 6 and 7

Whether or not the 'public' in general would have become involved in the debate, the inevitable consequence of insufficient resources being available to publicise and promote it was that it did not engage the wider population. It would have been helpful if there had been an opportunity to employ a range of techniques to encourage public participation. Moreover, time was an important factor: with more time a greater amount of work could have been done to reach out more widely. It is profoundly regrettable that the open part of the process, far from being a 'public debate', instead became a dialogue mainly restricted to people of a particular social and academic background. The greatest failure of the debate is that it did not engage with a wider array of people. (Paragraph 31)

To engage with the wider public, the debate needed to go into their living rooms, rather than be conducted in the village hall. With sufficient time and money to publicise and promote the debate, we have little doubt that it would have been possible to do so. (Paragraph 32)

We agree with the Committee's view that it is necessary to employ a range of techniques in order to encourage greater public participation. Government and the Steering Board had a shared aim of securing the broadest possible participation in the debate, particularly at 'grass roots' level. The Steering Board's chosen approach—organising a

series of launch events, and encouraging people to organise their own meetings at local level—has much to recommend it. Its success was limited mainly by the lack of advance publicity and the six-week timeframe, both of which resulted from delays earlier on in the process.

It is perhaps inevitable that people who had an existing interest in GM were more likely to attend the large public meetings. However, this is probably less true of some of the meetings organised at local level by organisations with no prior or particular interest in GM issues. Nevertheless people who choose to take part in a debate of this sort are by definition ‘self-selecting’, and are therefore more likely to already be engaged with the issue than the general population. To some extent this may be difficult to overcome, though more publicity would undoubtedly have enabled the debate to reach more people. In particular a tie-in with a TV programme could have been a very effective way of engaging people, and although the Steering Board discussed this idea it appears that it was not pursued early enough. One of the key lessons from the debate is that it is important to have an effective communications strategy in order to maximise opportunities for publicity through a range of media channels.

Recommendation 8

We endorse the view that it is critically important that the holding of the debate is seen to have an influence on the decisions subsequently made by Government. We recommend that in its response to the report of the public debate (and to this report) the Government set out exactly how it will take into account the outcomes of the debate in its decision-making about GM technology. In particular, it should set out precisely the legal framework under which decisions about GM will be taken. (Paragraph 36)

The Government has to operate within the existing EU legal framework, which in turn must be consistent with WTO rules. In this regard the key piece of legislation is the new and strengthened EC Directive 2001/18 on the deliberate release of genetically modified organisms (GMOs) into the environment, which requires case-by-case decisions following a comprehensive assessment of any potential risks to human health and the environment, on the basis of the scientific evidence. The requirements of Directive 2001/18 are also reflected in various other pieces of EU legislation governing the approval of medicines, veterinary medicines, plant protection products and, from April 2004, food and animal feed. We will provide a fuller explanation of how the EU regulatory system works in our response to the public debate.

The public debate will nevertheless help to inform the stance we take in future discussions with our EU partners about our regulatory role in relation to GMOs.

Recommendation 9

We would value an explanation from the Food Standards Agency of its decision to undertake a ‘public debate’ of its own about GM food, why it chose to do so at the time that it did, what was the cost to public funds of its initiative, and how its work

relates to the other strands of the public debate. We would also be keen to learn of future plans for the Agency to study public opinion about GM food. (Paragraph 38)

The Food Standards Agency will be responding separately on this point. However we believe that the FSA's activities were a useful contribution to the wider public debate.

Recommendations 10 and 11

The public debate was an imaginative initiative, but nonetheless represents an opportunity missed. Although other reasons for its failure can be found, including, no doubt, a degree of public apathy, two principal problems resulted from Government decisions: the tight deadline set for completion of the process, which meant that relevant data (the reports from the Strategy Unit and GM Science Review Panel, and the outcome of the FSEs) was not available, and the paltry resources allocated to the debate. The Government, in its response to our report, must allay the suspicion that, having agreed to undertake a public debate, it did as little as it could to make it work. (Paragraph 41)

We trust that the Government will look seriously at the lessons to be learned from the conduct of the GM public debate. As we have made clear in this report, the main lesson is that wide-ranging consultative exercises such as the GM public debate must be adequately resourced and must be given enough time to be conducted properly. (Paragraph 42)

While we acknowledge that with hindsight the initial level of funding allocated to the debate was too low, it was based on an estimate by COI of the funds needed to implement the programme outlined by the AEBC. When a strong case was made that it was inadequate the funding was doubled. It is doubtful the Government could then have agreed to the debate for which Defra had not been funded had substantially greater resources been known to be required. We do not in fact accept that the final budget was insufficient. Some of the available money could have been spent more wisely, and it is questionable whether spending significant other sums on publicity would have represented good value for taxpayers' money. GM Nation? succeeded in generating considerable media coverage, and with more time and thorough planning it should be possible to achieve even greater levels of publicity with similar resources.

As indicated above, we continue to believe that the deadlines we set for the public debate were appropriate, bearing in mind the need to ensure that we were able to consider its findings before decisions were taken at EU level on the possible commercialisation of GM crops. We do however accept that in the absence of external time constraints it would be preferable to allow a greater planning period for similar activities in future.