

Green light for GM? First official report into genetically modified crops in five years recommends 'safe and sustainable' roll-out in Britain

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There is no compelling evidence to suggest that GM crops are any more dangerous to humans, animals or the environment than conventionally farmed food and the time has come for Europe to be stripped of its obstructive control of the technology, senior scientists have advised the Prime Minister.

The case to press ahead with introducing GM crops both here and overseas has become overwhelming given the scale of the potential food shortages facing humanity in the coming decades – despite the British public being largely unaware of the impending crisis, they said.

Government science advisers have warned that European rules blocking GM crops are no longer fit for purpose and Britain should be allowed to decide for itself whether genetically modified crops should be grown in the UK given the many benefits that they could bring in terms of sustainable food production.

“We have limited agricultural land for growing food in the UK, yet we are part of a global food market and there is competition for limited resources and that is likely to increase,” Sir Mark Walport, the government’s chief scientist, said yesterday. “So the challenge is to get more from existing land in a sustainable way or face the alternative which is that people will go unfed, or we’ll have to bring more wilderness land into cultivation,” he added.

GM technology is one of the tools that could help farmers around the world produce food sustainably for a growing population, but in Europe the technology has been effectively blocked by the EU’s inappropriate regulatory process, Sir Mark said.

Only one GM plant is currently grown commercially in Europe – a type of GM maize grown mostly in Spain. EU red tape has hampered the introduction of many other GM crops carrying beneficial traits not seen in conventionally-bred varieties, the scientists said.

A report to the Council for Science and Technology, which advises David Cameron on scientific developments, warned that Britain and Europe are falling behind other parts of the world where GM crops have been embraced. It calls for the wholesale reorganisation of the way that the crops are assessed by the EU.

“The longer the EU continues to oppose GM whilst the rest of the world adopts it, the greater the risk that EU agriculture will become uncompetitive, especially as more GM crops and traits are commercialised successfully elsewhere,” Sir Mark said.

Professor Sir David Baulcombe of Cambridge University, one of the five leading plant scientists who co-authored the report, called for research and development of GM crops to be stepped up so that they could be grown both in the UK and overseas, notably Africa where increased food production is needed most.

“As there is no evidence for intrinsic environmental or toxicity risks associated with GM crops, it is not appropriate to have a regulatory framework that is based on the premise that GM crops are more hazardous than crop varieties produced by conventional breeding,” the report says.

“We propose that approval for commercial cultivation of new GM crops is made at a national level, as happens at present with pharmaceuticals,” it says.

(555 words)