

Welcome to the GM Observer – the newsletter of the Agricultural Biotechnology Council (abc).
abc is the umbrella group of the agricultural biotechnology industry in the UK. Our goal is to provide factual information about the agricultural use of GM technology in the UK.

Royal Society endorses role of technology to help support a “sustainable intensification” of agricultural production

This November, in the most comprehensive report on the future of British agriculture in more than twenty years, the Royal Society warned that millions of people face starvation in coming decades because of population growth and climate change. The report called for the use of proven agricultural technologies such as GM to meet the challenge.



The report entitled *Reaping the Benefits: Towards a Sustainable Intensification of Global Agriculture*, was commissioned in July 2008 in response to a UN report which predicted that world food production needs to double by 2050 to sustain a global population expected to reach nine billion.

The report called for a “new revolution in agriculture” that brings together traditional techniques such as crop rotation with the latest advancements in science. It also called for a series of options to be considered to help increase crop yields in the UK and around the world by between 50 per cent and 100 per cent, citing genetic modification of crops as one of many different options.

Further, commenting on years of neglect, the national academy of science called on the Government to invest £2 billion in crop research over the next 10 years.

Professor Sir David Baulcombe FRS, who chaired the Royal Society’s study, said: “We need to take action now to stave off food shortages. If we wait even five to ten years, it may be too late. (<http://royalsociety.org/>)

China pushes ahead with GM rice

China has approved genetically modified strains of rice and corn in a move experts say could dramatically boost crop yields and help the world’s most populous nation avoid food shortages.

The Chinese Ministry of Agriculture said it had issued initial production licences for genetically modified rice and corn, paving the way for commercial cultivation of other GM grain and cereal crops.

The Ministry said the decision was “an important outcome of China’s research on genetic engineering technology... It lays a good foundation for commercial production.”

Recognising the challenges of food security, Huang Dejun, chief analyst with Beijing Orient Agribusiness Consultant, said the government wanted the agricultural industry “to be prepared” for a potential grain shortage.

“China’s grain security is guaranteed now... but it is hard to rule out the possibility (of a shortage) as living standards improve or yields slump because of a sharp decrease in the area of farming land or serious impacts of climate change,” Huang said.

Beijing said in July 2008 that it aimed to cultivate high-yielding and pest-resistant genetically modified grains as it faces the challenge of feeding its 1.3 billion people and battles shrinking arable land and climate change.

Consumers more positive with knowledge

In November, the Food Standards Agency (FSA) published findings of a qualitative research project commissioned to explore public attitudes to genetic modification (GM).

This research found different levels of understanding about GM food. Attitudes to GM food are complex and the risks and benefits of GM food are weighed up differently depending on the factors that underpin views. The study found that peoples attitudes to GM became more positive as they became more informed.

Peoples attitudes became “more qualified and nuanced as people had become aware of the complexity of the debates on the subject” the report noted. (www.food.gov.uk)

Profiles:

Dacian Cioloş: Agriculture Commissioner

Romania's Dacian Cioloş will replace Mariann Fischer Boel as EU Commissioner for Agriculture, pending approval from the European Parliament.

The five-year mandate for Mr Cioloş will be of huge importance for British agriculture, with major decisions to be taken on the structure of the future Common Agriculture Policy and the EU budget.

Mr Cioloş was one of very few candidates that had any agricultural experience, something that will be vital when looking at the agenda ahead. Romania grew GM soy before accession, though now its farmers can no longer grow GM soy as it is not approved for cultivation in the EU.

John Dalli: Health and Consumer Commissioner

A member of the House of Representatives of Malta since 1987, John Dalli has been appointed as Health and Consumer Commissioner, a role that will become increasingly important as the Biotechnology, Pesticides and Health Unit will fall under his jurisdiction in the next Commission.

Most recently Dalli served as Minister for Social Policy. His portfolio included health, employment and industrial relations. (<http://ec.europa.eu/>)

FSA announces committee members to oversee public engagement on GM crops

The FSA has set up an independent steering group to shape and manage the forthcoming consumer dialogue work on genetic modification (GM) in food that the Agency has been asked to lead on, on behalf of the Government.

The steering group includes stakeholders with a variety of expertise and with differing views on GM. Professor John Curtice of the University of Strathclyde will chair the group. You can read more about the members of the group and their work here:

<http://www.food.gov.uk/news/newsarchive/2009/nov/gmdialogue>

Food security on the agenda at Copenhagen



The role of land use and the need to feed a growing population, alongside the use of innovative methods of production has been a high profile topic of discussion at the UN Conference on Climate Change taking place in Copenhagen this month. The Conference of 192 countries is seeking to negotiate a new global deal on climate change to replace the current, Kyoto protocol which ends in 2012.

With a focus on reducing deforestation, the summit will need to consider how to produce more food without damaging the natural environment. A report released by the UN's World Food Programme said the number affected by hunger could rise by between 10% and 20% without action to tackle global warming, with two thirds of the increase concentrated in Africa. (www.wfp.org)

Responding to the report, Dr Julian Little, Chairman of the Agricultural Biotechnology Council, says: "Food security is one of the biggest challenges we currently face, and the solution is clear: we must find ways in which to produce more food at affordable prices while continuing to reduce the environmental impact of farming. However, as widely acknowledged, our current methods of production will not be sufficient in meeting the increasing demand.

"The application of genetic modification (GM) is not the only solution, but it is an important tool that will help us achieve enhanced productivity, increased crop yields and reduced impact on the environment.

"To help tackle the challenges contributing to world hunger, farmers across the world must be allowed to produce more food at a fair price to consumers while safeguarding our natural resources. To do this, they must be given the freedom to choose modern, efficient farming methods based on tried and tested science." (<http://en.cop15.dk/>)