

## NEWS

# Britain losing out on GM crops, says expert

By Graham Tibbetts

A SENIOR Government agriculture adviser warned yesterday Britain would miss out on important advances if it did not sanction the growing of genetically modified crops.

Professor Sir Howard Dalton, the chief scientific adviser to the Department for the Environment, told *The Daily Telegraph* that developing GM produce would bring enormous environmental benefits.

He spoke out after a Government source reignited the debate by saying that the introduction of GM crops was not a question of "whether" but "how".

Moves to grow GM crops

have proved hugely controversial and in 2004, mindful of the public concern, the Government announced no GM crops would be grown in the "foreseeable" future.

But Prof Dalton claimed the public was now broadly supportive of GM crops.

No such crops are grown in Britain but Defra – the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs – said yesterday that they could conceivably be produced from 2009 onwards.

Only one GM crop, a form of maize, is approved for use in Europe, and even that is only grown in Spain.

The USA and developing countries such as India and

## Q&A

### How close are we to seeing British GM crops on our shelves?

It is at least two years away. The only GM crop licensed for use in Europe is unsuitable for UK conditions and is grown in northern Spain. BASF is conducting field trials of

blight-resistant potatoes in Cambridgeshire and Yorkshire.

### What are the benefits?

Supporters say we could develop crops that use less water and nutrients, are resistant to insects and produce higher yields. For western countries, this could bring environmental benefits through lower

pesticide use and water abstraction. In poorer countries, it could help tackle starvation.

### What are the disadvantages?

Opponents of GM say the health effects are still unclear. They claim sheep and goats are dying in India from eating genetically modified cotton. Critics

reject claims of higher yields and say the interests of big business are being put before environmental and health concerns.

### What is the Government's position?

It says its policy towards GM is "precautionary, evidence-based and sensitive to public concerns".

are benefiting significantly from this – their yields are dramatically improved."

Prof Dalton, who is stepping down at the end of the month to return to Warwick University, said the public would support GM once the benefits became clear.

"If people go to the petrol station and have a choice between buying ethanol at 50p a litre and gas a 99p a litre, it's obvious which one they would choose. If they see it benefiting them they will accept it."

The environmental advantages would also sway people, he said.

The combination of European Union opposition and the time it would take to gain

approval for GM crops means that none are likely to be grown here commercially until at least 2009.

Dr Julian Little, the chairman of the Agricultural Biotechnology Council which represents biotech companies, said 10 million farmers are benefiting – nine million in developing countries.

However, the Soil Association, the main campaigners for organic food in Britain, poured scorn on the moves.

Lord Melchett, its policy director, said: "Everyone knows it definitely won't happen. Unless someone is prepared to come out of the GM closet it's not worth taking seriously."

China, along with some South American countries, are way ahead of Britain in adopting the technology.

Prof Dalton, who was part of

a committee that produced a report on the health effects of GM four years ago, said: "We are being left behind. Most companies have gone to the

United States or China. Having developed the science in the UK we are losing out in the development and utilisation of it. Farmers in the US