

Tim Lott: Ideology buckles – it's too rigid, too flawed. Better by far to muddle on

Europe's secret plan to boost GM crop production

Gordon Brown and other EU leaders in campaign to promote modified foods

By Geoffrey Lean

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Gordon Brown and other European leaders are secretly preparing an unprecedented campaign to spread GM crops and foods in Britain and throughout the continent, confidential documents obtained by *The Independent on Sunday* reveal.

The documents – minutes of a series of private meetings of representatives of 27 governments – disclose plans to "speed up" the introduction of the modified crops and foods and to "deal with" public resistance to them.

And they show that the leaders want "agricultural representatives" and "industry" – presumably including giant biotech firms such as Monsanto – to be more vocal to counteract the "vested interests" of environmentalists.

News of the secret plans is bound to create a storm of protest at a time when popular concern about GM technology is increasing, even in countries that have so far accepted it.

Public opposition has prevented any modified crops from being grown in Britain. France, one of only three countries in Europe to have grown them in any amounts, has suspended their cultivation, and resistance to them is rising rapidly in the other two, Spain and Portugal.

The embattled biotech industry has been conducting a public relations campaign based round the highly contested assertion that genetic modification is needed to feed the world. It has had some success in the Government, where ministers have been increasingly speaking out in favour of the technology, and in the European Commission, with which its lobbyists have boasted of having "excellent working relations".

The secret meetings were convened by Jose Manuel Barroso, the pro-GM President of the Commission, and chaired by his head of cabinet, Joao Vale de Almeida. The prime ministers of each of the EU's 27 member states were asked to nominate a special representative.

Neither the membership of the group, nor its objectives, nor the outcomes of its meetings have been made public. But The IoS has obtained confidential documents, including an attendance list and the conclusions of the two meetings held so far – on 17 July and just two weeks ago on 10 October – written by the chairman.

The list shows that President Nicolas Sarkozy of France and Chancellor Angela Merkel of Germany sent close aides. Britain was represented by Sonia Phippard, director for food and farming at the Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs.



AFP/GETTY IMAGES

GM corn growing in France, which has since suspended cultivation of modified crops

The conclusions reveal the discussions were mainly preoccupied with how to speed up the introduction of GM crops and food and how to persuade the public to accept them.

The modified products have to be approved by the EU before they can be sown or sold anywhere in Europe. But though the Commission officials are generally strongly in favour, European governments are split, causing the Council of Ministers, on which they are represented, to be deadlocked.

In that event the bureaucrats on the Commission wave them through anyway. They are legally allowed to do this, but overruled governments and environmental groups are unhappy.

The conclusions of the first meeting called for the "speeding up of the authorisation process based on robust assessments so as to reassure the public", while the second one added: "Decisions could be made faster without compromising safety."

But the documents also make clear that Mr Barroso is going beyond mere exhortation by trying to get prime ministers to overrule their own agriculture and environment ministers in favour of GM. They report that the chairman "recalled the importance for prime ministers to look at the wider picture", "invited the participants to report the discussions of the group to their heads of governments", and "stressed the importance of drawing their attention to ongoing discussions in the Council [of Ministers]".

Helen Holder of Friends of the Earth Europe said: "Barroso's aim is to get GM into Europe as quickly as possible. So he is going straight to prime ministers and presidents to tell them to step on their ministers and get them into line."

The conclusions of the meetings on public opposition are even more incendiary. The documents ponder "how best to deal with public opinion" and call for "an emotion-free, fact-based dialogue on the high standards of the EU GM policy". And they record the chairman emphasising "the role of industry, economic partners and science to actively contribute to such a dialogue". He adds that "the public feels ill-informed" and says "agricultural representatives should be more vocal". And in a veiled swipe at environmental groups he says that the debate "should not be left to certain stakeholders who have a legitimate but vested interest in it".

What they say

'We have to feed an extra 2.5 billion people. It would be extraordinary if we chose not to exploit the most important breakthrough in biological science'

Professor Allan Buckwell

'New developments will benefit the world's poorest farmers: GM rice that is drought-resistant; transgenic crops with genes to protect against disease'

Lord Dick Taverne, Sense About Science

'GM crops pose unacceptable risks to farmers and the environment and have failed to increase yields despite funding at a cost of millions to UK taxpayers'

Kirtana Chandrasekaran, FoE

'GM crops do not increase yields. Scientists have found genetically engineered insecticide in crops can leak and kill beneficial soil fungi'

Peter Melchett, Soil Association

Q & A: The trouble with modified crops

How much GM is grown in Europe?

Very little. The documents boast the area increased by 21 per cent last year, proving "growing interest". But it still only covered 0.119 per cent of Europe's agricultural land.

What are the problems?

Mainly environmental. Official trials in Britain showed that growing GM crops was worse for wildlife than cultivating conventional ones. Worse, genes escape from the modified plants to create superweeds and to contaminate normal and organic crops, denying consumers a choice to be GM-free.

Do they endanger health?

Hard to tell. Some studies show that they may do, others (including almost all those by industry) are reassuring. The trouble is that very few truly independent, peer-reviewed research has been done. Most consumers have sensibly concluded that they would sooner be safe than sorry, particularly as they get no benefit from buying GM.

Can they feed the world?

Almost certainly not. Despite all the hype, present GM varieties actually have lower yields than their conventional counterparts. The seeds are expensive to buy and grow, so wealthy developing-world farmers would tend to use them and drive poor ones out of business, increasing destitution. The biggest agricultural assessment ever conducted – chaired by Professor Robert Watson, now Defra's chief scientist – recently concluded that they would not do the job.

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