

EU 'clears the way to fast-track GM crops'

By [Sean Poulter](#)

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Brussels is planning to allow each member state to decide whether to grow GM foods or to ban them.

The European Commission today published proposals that it said were designed to give countries more freedom and flexibility over the cultivation of genetically modified crops.

But opponents of 'Frankenstein foods' warned that the changes would speed up the approval regime for the controversial crops and ensure that efforts by some states to block them will be side-stepped.



More freedom? The EC's plans to offer individual choice to countries on the issue could also be seen as a way to push the controversial crops into European fields

At present, EU countries vote together on whether to allow applications to grow new GM crops.

In future, once scientists working for the commission approve a new crop or food as safe, any of the 27 member states will be allowed to grow it or put in on shop shelves.

Other countries, which in the past might have blocked approval, will be able to implement their own boycott.

The commission said the new regime, which must still be approved by EU governments and the European Parliament, 'seeks to achieve the right balance between maintaining an EU authorisation system and the freedom for member states to decide on GM cultivation in their territory'.

Health and consumer policy commissioner John Dalli said: 'Experience with GM organisms so far shows that member states need more flexibility to organise the co- existence of GM and other types of crops such as conventional and organic crops.

'A very thorough safety assessment and a reinforced monitoring system are priorities in GM cultivation and are therefore being pursued vigorously.'



Opposition: The issue of GM crops is still a divisive one, as illustrated by this cheeky protest from the 'Barewitness' group in Sussex

But there are concerns that Britain's Conservative-Lib Dem Government will follow the same pro-GM agenda adopted by the last Labour government.

Despite massive opposition from British shoppers, successive administrations have been pressing for the acceptance of GM farming across Europe.

This support has been maintained-despite concerns for human health and evidence from the U.S. of the emergence of GM superweeds such as pigweed that are choking some farms.

Caroline Spelman, the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Secretary, has a history of supporting genetically modified crops through her links to the farming industry.

And the Food Standards Agency is facing accusations that it is trying to push GM on to dinner plates through a planned £500,000 consultation exercise.

The American agro-chemical giants behind GM farming see the move by the EU as a vital step towards getting consumers on this side of the Atlantic to accept their crops.

Previously, the U.S. government has complained to the World Trade Organisation that attempts to block GM by European governments are an illegal restraint of free trade.

Mute Schimpf, Friends of the Earth Europe's food campaigner, said: 'While the commission is seemingly offering countries the right to implement national bans, in reality the proposal aims to do the opposite - opening Europe's fields to GM crops.'

'The commission continues to fail to protect Europe's food and feed from contamination by GM crops, and we urge countries to reject this deal as it stands.'

GM Freeze, a coalition of community groups and green campaigners, said: 'The proposals have been produced to try to overcome member state opposition to the commercial cultivation approval of GM crops.'

'Many member states are not happy with the safety assessments of GM crops for cultivation on health and environmental grounds and have demanded a tougher approach.'

One concern is that the plans do not offer safeguards and compensation to organic and conventional farmers whose crops are contaminated by GM pollen.

GM Freeze director Pete Riley added: 'Member states need to ensure that in the short and long-term they will be able to ban a GM crop without ending up in court or with a WTO dispute.'

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Quote: "Labelling is all about choice. Where the produce comes from. And most like to buy British not only because it is likely to be "fresher" but to help our own farmers."- anoldun, Wolverhampton.UK, 14/7/2010