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The Public Needs to Hear the Case Against GM Crops

By Peter Melchett

The Independent spent last week trotting out every argument in favour of GM crops, but the future of food and farming won't be decided by this obsessive interest in one -- risky and out-dated -- crop-breeding technology.

The industry's claims that GM crops yield more are countered by stories of American farmers moving back to higher-yielding non-GM varieties. An industry-supported paper claiming GM crops led to a dramatic reduction in chemical sprays is countered by scientific papers using US government data which show, overall, spray use has increased since GM crops were introduced. The same old unscientific claim that "no one had been harmed from eating GM food" is trotted out again, despite the fact that no scientific research has been done on this. In fact, diet-related ill-health has soared in the US since GM food was introduced, but as no research has been done comparing Americans who eat GM with those who don't, we don't know if GM food is to blame.

The pro-GM campaign has always claimed that GM is needed to feed the world, based on the false idea that "feeding the world" just means higher yields. Claims for higher yields are based on the theory, now discredited, that GM crops resistant to Roundup (which kills all other plants) will make weed-control easier; or that GM crops with an insect-killing chemical in every part of the plant will be more resistant to insect attack. Not true. North America is now plagued by superweeds resistant to Roundup and other weed-killers, and insect pests have developed resistance to GM insect-killing crops. No GM crops have been bred that consistently yield more.

The challenges facing farming are not mainly about increasing yields. The first is how we continue to produce food while cutting farming's greenhouse gas emissions by 80 per cent or more. We need farming systems (not individual crop varieties) which do not rely on manufactured, fossil fuel-based nitrogen fertiliser, dangerous pesticides, or increasingly scarce mined phosphate. Second, to feed the hungry and starving, we need farming systems not reliant on expensive inputs, which would help farmers in the world's poorest regions grow a variety of food resilient to drought, flood and other extremes. As important is the challenge of producing healthier diets to combat the growing obesity and diet-related health crisis, which began in the US, but now affects most of the world. This means more seasonal diets, with less, but better quality, grass-fed meat, and more fruit and veg.

All these changes involve a revolution in how we farm, and when 400 international scientists got together to look at how we meet these multiple, crucial challenges, they concluded that low-input farming systems, such as organic, are the answer, and that GM crops have no part to play.

This month the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation gave advance notice in the Commons of research which shows that if we achieve some reduction in food wastage, and change our diets in the way that health professionals say we must, organic farming could feed a greatly increased global population in 2050, without using any more land. Only by ignoring the wider picture of the real challenges facing farming, the needs of people both rich and poor, and the need to fight climate change, has the pro-GM campaign survived this long.

Peter Melchett is policy director of the Soil Association. In Wednesday’s paper we erroneously said he was going to debate the GM issue with Mark Lynas. We are sorry for the mistake.

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