Coping with GMO Issues

Neil Griffiths

At the height of the consumerism on this issue in late February early March 1999 I was contacted by a consortium of European retailers to identify whether my company could supply any solutions to the complex problem of the supply into Europe of non-GM ingredients, particularly soya, maize and their derivatives.

Having been deeply embroiled in this issue I now fully understand the complexity, liability and the politics behind it. Providing solutions has not been easy. The consumer attitudes and bad press surrounding this issue have lead major retailers and manufacturers across Europe to adopt non-GM policies across all of their products.

Should a mistake happen and a product is found to contain GMOs which is either not labelled, or carries a non-GM claim the potential for brand damage is high. This has lead to ingredient suppliers becoming extremely reluctant to guarantee anything. Should the supplier get it wrong, civil claims for brand damage could be substantial. Add to this the non segregation policy of the US in the supply of Soya and maize and their derivatives and you begin to have some idea of the problems involved. To put it in perspective there are 73 million acres of soya being harvested in the US.

You could place the whole of the UK and the Republic of Ireland in these fields with room to spare. Approximately 32 million of these 73 million acres are planted with GM Roundup Ready soya. In Brazil they produced 32 million tons of soya last year and as much as 10% of this years crop is believed to be GM round up ready soya. Although some companies have established Identity Preserved (IP) systems which attempt through systems, procedures and validation, to separate GM from non-GM, it is unlikely that the US will produce more than 2 million tons of IP, non-GM soya this year As this represents a small percentage of Europe's needs, it is no wonder that many retailers and manufacturers have been forced to remove Soya from their products. Further, this presents a substantive marketing opportunity for countries like Brazil whose current harvest could supply substantive quantities of segregated non-GM Soya. The repercussions of this are only now beginning to be felt in the US as exports to Europe reduce. It seems unlikely that the position will repeat itself with the US 2000 harvest as farmers and processors react, not only to this market loss, but also the growing concerns in North Arnerica regarding GMOs. I detect a growing feeling by American consumers that if their European counterparts are worried about this issue, that they should also be concerned.

There is no doubt that European Regulations have also played a huge part in the current GMO debate. Ingredients of GM Soya and maize origin are currently required to be labelled. An extension of this to GM flavourings and additives is now in place. The current Regulation from the EC on thresholds recognises that it is not possible to grow acres of Soya and maize in a bubble. A 1% threshold for adventitious contamination associated with the decision to label or not to label comes into force on the 10 April 2000 following publication of Commission Regulation 49/2000. However, this does not stand alone and is linked to the need to establish that the

system of supply has avoided the use of GM materials. It is possible that clearly documented and properly audited IP systems could satisfy this requirement. No threshold is available for ingredients of unknown origin. It is also appropriate to clarify that the 1% threshold value should be seen as a maximum in finished products and operators should, therefore, aim at achieving the lowest possible level of adventitious presence of GM material at each stage of the process. Further, the 1% value is not only for the adventitious presence of material derived from Soya, maize and their derivatives but the combined adventitious presence of such material and any other material placed on the market pursuant to Regulation (EC) No 258/97 derived from other genetically modified organisms. What is further surprising is the Commissions silence on claims. It was expected that the Commission would take a view on the threshold required for a non-GM or GM free claim, but this was not forthcoming. However, recently the Commission has confirmed that it is working on rules for ìGM-free labelling. Further, the recent Commission Regulation 50/2000 on Additives and Flavourings requires the labelling of additives or flavourings produced from genetically modified organisms or genetically modified. At the moment there is no de minimis thresholds but these will be proposed in due course. These latest Regulations have led to a lot of confusion and differences of interpretation which will require quick resolution. Guidance from the Commission is being sought.

It therefore became eminently obvious to me that a solution to this problem of non-GM supply revolved around the current good work being undertaken by the industry on IP systems. Further, that the sort of information generated by these IP systems such as traceability information, systems and procedures adopted and validation information of testing and inspection, needed to be available to importers, manufacturers and retailers within Europe. From a UK perspective this was essential to meet the needs of the due diligence defence and from an EC perspective this was essential for the 1% threshold to be available. However, having evaluated some 17 IP systems from around the world it was clear that many required some work before one could feel confident that they would guarantee the supply of non-GM ingredients. Many of these systems have only been in place for a limited period and have not had the benefit of proactive, reactive measures. In some of these systems there was a lack of detail and many had not based the validation of these quality assurance systems on HACCP principals. The quality of some of the testing was suspect and in many there was also a lack of third party assessment to avoid the marking your own exam paper criticism. In order to provide a solution to these problems the Cert ID programme was established as a joint venture with Genetic ID based in the USA. Over 150 companies including farmers, distributors, processors, ingredient suppliers, manufacturers and retailers were consulted during the production of the standard which is at the heart of the scheme. The aim of the standard was not to replace current IP systems, but to establish the benchmark against which they could be assessed. The standard contains three modules covering propagation material and agricultural production, distribution and storage and raw material processing and finished product manufacture. Companies with current IP systems who apply to Cert ID will have their IP system evaluated against the standard. Once non conformances have been corrected the IP system becomes an approved Cert ID IP system. At that stage Cert ID risk assess the IP system using HACCP principles and decide the ongoing validation necessary in terms of inspection and testing. Any organisation can apply to Cert-ID to become an approved test house or inspection body. They will, of course have to meet the

required criteria to establish inspector or laboratory competence. Clearly the success of the scheme will depend upon efficient data transfer. Software solutions have been designed to enable electronic transfer of information into the database. Manufacturers being supplied with Cert ID materials will be able to access the information via a helpline. Without such a central database the duplication of effort and cost involved for the industry is considerable. This programme is intended to remove substantive cost from the industry.

In conclusion, participation in the Cert ID programme will help to demonstrate a commitment to quality and the delivery of non-GM ingredients with a certification mark for easy recognition of non-GM products in order to increase customer confidence in the final correctly labelled product.