

# Are Consumers Ready to Accept GMOs?

## Robin Grove-White

- UK consumers are not ready to accept GMOs in food or crops.

39% (2003), alongside this decline in support. (UEA/MORI). The term 'ambivalence' is frequently used by researchers to describe this state of affairs.

- Levels of expressed opposition remain at around 50% (1996-2003) (MORI)
  - There is major lack of public confidence in the adequacy of UK government regulation of GM. Thus:
    - 55% of people lack such confidence versus 18% who have it. (UEA/MORI)
    - The public debate found that amongst people's key concerns were uncertainties about as-yet unknown environmental and health consequences of GM crops and foods. The existence of significant knowledge gaps in these areas has been confirmed in the government's recent 'GM Science Review'.
    - Negative environmental impacts of GM crops (egg on nature and biodiversity) are a major public concern:
      - 63% of people register such concern v. 10% who are not concerned. (UEA/MORI)
      - The motives for developing GM are strongly questioned by many people:
        - 75% say GM developments are driven more by profit prospects than the public interest. (UEA/MORI)
        - A recent (2002) EU-financed independent study of public attitudes towards GM groups/foods in five EU countries including the UK, found that much of the unease was based on

*'empirical lay knowledge about the past behaviour of institutions responsible for the development and regulation of technological innovations and risks, supported by numerous commonly shared experiences'.* ('Public

Perceptions of Agricultural Biotechnologies in Europe' (PABE))

- The prospects of GM wheat in the UK need to be viewed against the background of these more general public attitudes towards GM foods/crops. GM in people's daily bread is most unlikely to prove acceptable.
- Amongst the factors underlying public concern will be: possible long-term health issues; contamination

of non-GM wheat production/seed banks; crossbreeding with wild relatives and other biodiversity impacts; further concentration of food chain ownership patterns.

- Current controversies in Canada and the US surrounding Monsanto's proposed Round-Up Ready wheat point to a new, and still more controversial phase of GM debate. This will tend to reinforce attitudes in Europe, and the UK in particular.
- The independent US Pew Institute has said: 'Wheat is really the bellwether of where [GM] technology is going to go'. Rejection of GM wheat by American farmers could have a chilling effect on the overall biotech industry, because companies would be reluctant to invest in other plants.

## Are Consumers Ready to accept GMOs?

Professor Robin Grove-White,  
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- UK consumers are not ready to accept GMOs in food or crops.
- The recent Government-sponsored Public Debate, *GM Nation?*, found: **'People are generally uneasy about GM'**. **'The more people engage in GM issues, the harder their attitudes and the more intense their concerns'**. And **'there is widespread mistrust of government and multi-national companies' in the GM sphere.** (September 2003)

- **Recent opinion polls confirm public scepticism.**
- Public support for GM foods has declined from 31% (1996) to 14% (2003) (MORI)
- Numbers of people uncertain about their attitudes towards GM foods (ie express neither support nor opposition) have grown from 16% (1996) to 39% (2003), alongside this decline in support. (JEA/MORI)
- Levels of expressed opposition remain at around 50% (1996-2003) (MORI)

- The 'GM Nation?' public debate found that amongst people's key concerns were uncertainties about as-yet unknown environmental and health consequences of GM crops and foods. The existence of significant knowledge gaps in these areas has been confirmed in the government's recent 'GM Science Review'.

- **Negative environmental impacts of GM crops (eg on nature and biodiversity) are a major public concern:**
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- **The prospects of GM wheat in the UK need to be viewed against the background of these more general public attitudes towards GM foods/crops.** GM in people's daily bread is most unlikely to prove acceptable.
- Amongst the factors underlying public concern will be: allergenicities; possible long-term health issues; contamination of non-GM wheat production/seed banks; cross-breeding with wild relatives and other biodiversity impacts; further concentration of food chain ownership patterns.