

**PLEASE CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY  
GM POLICY STATEMENT**

**BY THE RT HON MARGARET BECKETT MP,  
SECRETARY OF STATE FOR ENVIRONMENT  
FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS**

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1. With permission, Mr Speaker, I would like to make a statement on the government's approach to the technology of genetic modification including its use in crops.
2. The tool of GM has been used for at least 10 years across the world in the production of food and medicines – both human and animal.
3. In the UK only a handful of foods have been approved for use – GM soya and tomato puree and some forms of maize – the first two

approved under the previous administration and the maize in 1997 and 1998. At present NO GM crop has all the approvals needed for commercial cultivation in the UK.

4. Decisions as to what can be consumed or grown in the EU as a whole have been taken by member states collectively under a regime of safety testing, monitoring and control which itself dates back ten years.
5. This legal framework has recently been substantially strengthened, and that a much strengthened regulatory regime came into effect in the UK last year. It is firmly based on the precautionary principle as applied on a strictly case-by-case basis. Every GMO for which authorisation is sought must receive a comprehensive assessment of any potential risk to human health or the environment.

6. In 1998 this government decided to go further. We were advised by English Nature of their concern about the effect of current GM herbicide-resistant crops on biodiversity. It was agreed that farm-scale trials would be conducted to assess these risks. Those trials were largely completed and reported by the end of last year, and their results referred to our independent advisory committee, ACRE, for their assessment.
7. In the meantime another advisory committee – the AEBC – had advised the government to fund an independently-run public debate or dialogue on GM issues.
8. I accepted that advice and in May 2002 announced that the government and the devolved administrations would sponsor such a dialogue with three strands – the debate itself, a thorough review of the science, and

an economic cost and benefit study by the Prime Minister's Strategy Unit.

9. The public dialogue reported general unease about GM crops and food and little support for early commercialisation of GM crops. People already engaged with the issues were generally much more hostile. Those not so engaged were more open-minded, anxious to know more, but still very cautious and it was suggested that as they learned more their hostility deepened.
  
10. The **costs and benefits study** concluded that the GM crops currently available offer only some small and limited benefits to UK farmers, but that future developments in GM crops could potentially offer benefits of greater value and significance even in the UK.

11. The Science Review concluded that GM is not a single homogeneous technology and applications should continue to be assessed on a case-by-case basis.
12. It reaffirmed that there are some gaps in scientific knowledge and in particular that it is important that the regulatory system is kept under review so that it keeps pace with any new developments. But it concluded that there was no scientific case for ruling out all GM crops or products.
13. It examined all the concerns generally raised. In particular it reported no verifiable ill-effects from extensive human and animal consumption of products from GM crops over 7 years, and concluded too that current GM crops were very unlikely either to invade the countryside or be toxic to wildlife. The most important environmental issue identified was indeed the effect on farmland wildlife which

was the subject of our extensive trials – the largest in the world.

Our independent advisers have now reported to us on these trials and on the basis of that advice and having consulted the DAs, I have concluded that:

- the UK should oppose the commercial cultivation of the relevant varieties of GM beet and oilseed rape anywhere in the EU using the management regime tested in the Farm-Scale Evaluations
- but that we should agree in principle to the commercial cultivation of GM herbicide-tolerant maize, but only subject to two further important conditions:
  - first, that restrictions should be imposed on the existing EU marketing consent, which expires in October 2006, so that it can only be

grown and managed as in the trials, or under such conditions as will not result in adverse effects on the environment.

- and second, in response to concerns which have been raised about the phase-out of atrazine in the EU, that the consent holders should be required to carry out further scientific analysis to monitor changes in herbicide use on conventional maize and to submit new evidence if they seek to renew the existing EU marketing consent when it expires in 2006.

14. Before commercial cultivation of GM maize can proceed separate approval will also be required under seeds legislation, and also under pesticides legislation for the associated herbicide use. Chardon LL will not be added to the UK National List until the necessary amendments to the EU marketing consent are in place. We also anticipate that coexistence measures will be in place before

any GM crops are grown commercially. I do not in fact anticipate any commercial cultivation of GM maize before spring 2005 at the earliest.

15. The Farm-Scale Evaluations also raised much more far reaching questions about crop management and the environment, questions which, incidentally reinforce the value of the case by case approach. There was no blanket difference between GM and non-GM crops. The trial crop with the 'best' results for the environment was a conventional crop. The one which was 'worst' was also a conventional crop.
16. Yet we have nothing like the influence over conventional crops that we have over GM, even though the effects may be just as far-reaching. We are giving careful consideration to these issues.



17. I believe that the approach I have outlined today is the right one. It is precautionary. It is evidence-based. In practice it means licensing one application, which runs till October 2006, and is subject to two further conditions.
18. Apart from the scientific decisions which flow from the trials there is the related issue of GM and non-GM crops being grown in the same area – so-called coexistence. The AEBC has recently produced advice on this issue.
19. I propose that, as the AEBC advise, farmers who wish to grow GM crops should be required to comply with a code of practice based on the EU's 0.9% labelling threshold, and that this code should have statutory backing.
20. There are particular concerns for organic farming to which the Government has

increasing funding and to which we remain committed. The AEBC argued for a lower threshold for organic farming but could not agree on a figure. We will explore further with stakeholders whether a lower threshold should be applied on a crop-by-crop basis.

21. I will also consult stakeholders on options for providing compensation to non-GM farmers who suffer financial loss through no fault of their own. But I must make clear that any such compensation scheme would need to be funded by the GM sector itself, rather than by Government or producers of non-GM crops.
22. The Government will also provide guidance to farmers interested in establishing voluntary GM-free zones in their areas, consistent with EU legislation.
23. Mr Speaker, this is a difficult issue bedevilled by confusion. There are many legitimate

concerns – concerns about gene stacking, cross pollination, and much else. Reports which combine comment on all these matters can be misleading.

24. People worry that a GM crop could affect wild relatives and hence the gene pool. Maize (the crop we are prepared to licence) has no wild relatives in the UK. It is highly unlikely that any stray remaining plant or seed would survive a winter here to raise concerns about a subsequent crop. Equally there is very little organic maize grown here. So many of the concerns usually raised do not apply. This reinforces the value of a case-by-case approach.
25. Some GM crops are already used here for animal feed. Several GM veterinary medicines are in use and much vegetarian cheese is produced using a GM processing aid.

26. There is no scientific case for a blanket approval of all the uses of GM. Safety, human health and the environment must remain at the heart of our regulatory regime and rigorous and robust monitoring must be maintained.

27. But equally there is no scientific case for a blanket ban on the use of GM. I know of no one who argues, for instance, that the GM tool alone can solve the problems of the developing world. But it is less than honest to pretend, especially against a background of climate change, that GM has not the potential to contribute to some solutions.

28. This too was part of the outcome of the public dialogue. I thank those who ran it and those who took part. From that process and many other attempts to assess public opinion, it is clear that most people believe that the use of

genetic modification should be approached with caution. They want strong regulation and monitoring and in addition farmers want a framework of rules for coexistence of GM and non-GM crops, and customers want a clear regime for traceability and labelling so that they can make their own choices. I believe that the rules which we now have and those which we shall put in place in the months ahead meet the criteria as well as being soundly based on the scientific evidence before us.

29. I commend this issue to the House.