

Grain of truth or GM fudge?

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GM crops: bright new dawn for farming and food production or twilight for wildlife?

A new report suggests that the impact of GM crops on the environment could be mixed, depending on the crop.

The report is produced from the results of a study into the environmental impact of GM crops to help the UK Government decide whether or not to allow the go ahead of commercial GM crop cultivation in this country.

The experiment was designed to test if the impact of growing certain GM crops on the abundance and variety of farmland plants and animals was any different to that of conventional crop varieties.

It says that at least two of the crops in the study GM sugar beet and GM oilseed rape may cause a decline in wildlife. GM maize, it is suggested, may actually be

'kinder' to plants and animals than the normal crop.

These tests, so far, have not investigated the possible impact on human health or the issue of 'contamination' through pollen spread. This is one of the main controversies surrounding GM crops. For example, GM maize cross-pollinates very easily by wind and, if commercial planting was given the go ahead, may threaten conventional and organic farmers.

Some critics suggest that the testing of GM crops has only looked at the short-term and farmers in the US and Canada, who have been growing GM crops for years, say that problems only emerge after several years. These problems include the fast development of resistance among weeds to the herbicides applied to GM crops leading to increased use of herbicides and the use of more toxic chemicals.

Biotechnology companies (such as the multinational firm Monsanto) claim that genetic modification of crops can increase harvests and benefit the environment. Some believe it is a step to preventing a future world food crisis. Groups opposed to GM crops say that they may damage the environment, may damage human health and limit freedom of choice in what consumers can eat. Most of the crops that have been genetically modified are done so to be resistant to herbicides and pesticides, in order that they are not harmed by, for example, weed killers; some are modified to be resistant to pests; others so that the crop has a longer life after it has been harvested. GM tomato puree for example is made by switching off the gene which makes the tomatoes go soft when ripe so the tomatoes last longer, hold less water so require less watering when growing on the farm and less water removal at the factory to make the concentrated puree.