

GM food for thought

By Dominic Standish
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It is time for this government to end the restrictions on genetically modified foods that proliferated under the previous government.

The last government opposed the sowing of GM crops in open fields. In December 1999, it decided to temporarily suspend the use of seven GM food products. Then in August 2000, the cabinet suspended the marketing of four GM varieties of maize, already approved by the European Union, citing what the Agriculture Ministry described as a "precautionary measure."

The decision had "no legal or scientific basis," according to Assobiotec, the national trade group for biotechnology firms.

Indeed, this decision brought the last Italian government into conflict with the EU Scientific Committee on Food, which examined the arguments presented by the Italian authorities and found that no detailed scientific grounds were given for considering that these types of food endanger human health.

This assessment was not surprising given the previous ministry's philosophy on biotechnology was based on the precautionary principle, whereby preventive actions could be taken without scientific evidence of risks.

The current government is increasing GM food regulation, not realizing that this cannot revive public trust of scientists or politicians.

Last July, Agriculture Minister Giovanni Alemanno suggested that stricter labeling could convince Italy to end its opposition to the approval of new GM products. In September, he announced the establishment of a national food safety agency and a scientific committee to serve as a liaison between the government and scientists, especially on GM issues.

This January, Alemanno proposed a policy of "zero tolerance" of GM seeds and proposed to invest at least €50 million in controls to guarantee seeds are free of genetic material.

"I think that Italian agriculture should

be exempt from gene technology ... because the processing of high-quality foods needs to be GM-free," he has declared, adding that that consumers had the right to choose what they eat.

But surely consumers are not free to decide whether they think GM foods are of high quality while Italian agriculture faces restrictions on developing gene technology.

Is Alemanno sacrificing consumer choice to protect agriculture from GM imports?

Despite the skepticism of the government, GM products are being consumed in Italy. For example, the Green Environment and Society group has estimated that 40 percent of Italy's increasing imports of soybeans are GM, although reliably precise figures are unavailable.

Now wine growers will be free to plant GM vines after a European Commission directive on Feb. 14.

This provoked the wrath of the Green Party and environmental groups such as Legambiente, the Slow Food Movement and Greenpeace. But we should not panic about GM foods given the findings of a new report published by Britain's leading scientific body, the Royal Society in February.

"Genetically modified plants for food use and human health: an update" states that "at present there is no evidence to suggest that those GM foods that have been approved for use are harmful."

However, the Royal Society in its press release accompanying the report raised hypothetical risks of GM foods. As Tony Gilland, the editor of the forthcoming book, "Science: Can We Trust The Experts?", explained to me, this meant that the key report finding that existing GM foods are safe was largely ignored by the media in favor of scare stories.

The media have a responsibility to report developments with GM products using scientific facts without resorting to raising unfounded fears. We should not allow our propensity to panic during these fearful times to prevent us from enjoying the benefits of GM foods.

GM foods have been developed that

are resistant to many diseases, are cheaper than non-GM food and some believe quality has also been improved in many cases.

I think Italy's *prodotti nostrani*, or home grown products, are hard to beat for quality. However, a research program at the University of Milan is aiming to change the genetic composition of around 30 typical Italian foods to provide resistance to dangerous viruses and bacteria, which could otherwise threaten the plants' existence.

The government should open the Italian market to GM foods so that consumers can decide whether they want to eat them, while EU law is based on what European Farm Commissioner Franz Fischler described as "muddling through."

The EU imposed a moratorium on imports of foods that are more than 1 percent GM, but this has been increasingly challenged.

Unfortunately, better scientific information alone cannot prevent fear of GM foods. Fear itself has become a sickness, with frustration and stress regarded as pathological conditions, even when there is no scientific evidence to cause concern.

This is why combating the culture of fear is the responsibility of scientists plus politicians, journalists and anyone who believes in having a rational debate about developments like GM foods.

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