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Farmers should embrace GM

Source: FarmingUK Newsdesk



One of the world's leading agricultural scientists has said that organic farmers should embrace GM. Gordon Conway, Professor of International Development at Imperial College London and a former government adviser, said in an article in the Times that GM could help the organic movement. But his views have been rejected by GM Freeze - an organisation which has the support of the Soil Association, Friends of the Earth and the Organic Research Centre.

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Professor Conway's intervention in the GM debate comes amid increasing pressure from scientists for greater use of GM crops to ensure food security. The world's population will reach nine billion by 2050. The UK Government is not the only one to have recognised the need to maximise food production over the coming years, and Professor Conway believes that GM could have a very important role to play in that.

For organic egg producers the argument could have implications for the availability and price of feed. For the poultry sector there is no alternative to soya with the same level and quality of proteins, but the main soya producing countries in North and South America have been moving largely over to GM production. Brazil is the only major supplier with any significant amount of non-GM soya available to European farmers. If non-GM soya continues to be grown in sufficient quantities, it may only be available at a significant price premium and sharp rises in feed costs are the last thing that organic egg producers need at the moment. Sales of organic eggs have been falling as a result of the recession. Consumers are already extremely price-conscious. More price pressure as a result of feed costs could be very damaging.

But GM Freeze says the prospects for availability of non-GM soya is not as gloomy as some people think. Campaign director Pete Rider says his organisation's discussions with growers in Brazil indicate that non-GM soya will continue to be planted and that GM crop planting may actually increase - partly as a result of problems with weeds in GM crops.

"GM crops have been very much geared to the use of artificial chemical herbicides. Experience in North and South America is now showing conclusively that the system that has been developed leads to quite rapid development of weed resistance to the main herbicide," he said. "There are now some major weed problems developing in the main GM crops in North and South America." In his article in The Times, Professor Conway said that the organic movement should overcome its hostility to genetically modified crops and embrace the contribution that they could make to sustainable farming. He said that the ban on organic farmers using GM crops was based on an excessively rigid rejection of synthetic approaches to farming and a misconception that natural ways were safer and more environmentally friendly than man-made ones.

Farmers, he said, should use the best aspects of organic methods and GM technology to maximise

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yields whilst limiting damage to ecosystems. He accepted that organic lobbyists would regard the idea as heresy, but said that genetic engineering could create better organic crops than those grown today with further environmental benefits.

"What frustrates me is there is a real potential for combining GM technology and organic approaches," said Professor Conway, who stepped down last year as chief scientific adviser to the Department for International Development. "To say that is probably heretical, but there would be real benefits if we got over this notion that GM is somehow not organic."

He said that conventional farming had a lot to learn from organic agriculture, as inorganic fertilisers, pesticides and herbicides had been overused, causing environmental damage. GM crops, he said, were compatible with the organic movement's goal of making farming more sustainable, but fell foul of its strict but misguided notion that natural methods were always best. "A lot of the world view is that nature is always benign and that whatever we do is not benign, and that is pure rubbish," he said. "Nature is full of very poisonous things indeed. You have got these rigid rules, which are reinforced by a number of misconceptions, putting it mildly."

While the processes used to create GM crops were unnatural, so too was the conventional breeding that had created today's non-GM varieties. Both methods involved genes that were natural in origin, but genetic engineering could create crops with significant advantages. The rigidity of organic certification rules could work against sustainability by blocking the use of helpful technologies, he said.

Herbicide-tolerant GM crops, for example, could encourage "no-till" farming that reduced carbon emissions. "You can genetically engineer crops to be better organic crops. At the moment, I don't think many people would accept that, but I think eventually they will," he said.

Instead of concentrating on natural, farmers should pick and choose the most sustainable options regardless of their origin. "If we are going to get a sustainable, resilient world, we need appropriate technologies and we should not go in with a rigid set of preconceptions," he said. "I think we are going to end up in a very interesting hybrid world in which we choose the technology because it is appropriate, not because of where it has come from. And 2050 will be like that: it will not be completely high-technology, and it will not be a completely back-to-nature world."

Pete Riley rejected Professor Conway's arguments. "GM agriculture is a continuation of intensive farming systems that have been shown to fail on a number of issues, particularly in protecting the environment but also in terms of sustainability, both economically and environmentally," he said.

He pointed to an international report prepared in 2008. The report, the International Assessment of Agricultural Knowledge, Science and Technology for Development, was partially funded by the UN, the World Bank and the World Health Organisation. Pete Riley said the scientists who prepared the report felt that we needed to pay far greater attention to organic farming methods than we did at the moment. They said the price of oil and phosphates were beginning to affect the prices that farmers were having to pay for inputs. "We have to find an alternative approach that is affordable for farmers but is also affordable for the planet. So far from our perspective GM does not fit that model. It certainly didn't fit the views of the scientists who carried out this project. They came out very strongly in favour of developing what they called agro-ecological research and methods for farming. That involves managing the soil, managing natural resources, pest control without overly relying on pesticides. These are a lot of the techniques used by organic farmers around the world at the moment."

His organisation is calling for a freeze on:

- the growing of genetically modified plants and the production of genetically modified farm animals for any commercial purpose;
- imports of genetically modified foods, plants, farm crops and farm animals, and produce from genetically modified plants and animals;
- the patenting of genetic resources for food and farm crops.

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Posted By Anonymous At 02/02/2010 18:55:32

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