

GM Freeze Briefing - Brexit and GM



How the UK's departure from the European Union could bring genetically modified crops to our fields and our food; why that matters and what can be done about it.

GM crops are directly linked with large-scale industrial monoculture. Despite decades of intense investment and promotion, only two GM traits are in large scale cultivation - herbicide tolerant GM crops that can withstand repeated spraying with a particular weed killer and Bt crops that produce a powerful insecticide within their own cells.

The UK public has always been concerned about GM foods and the [Food Standards Agency \(FSA\)'s Biannual Public Attitudes Tracker](#) shows that concern has risen in recent years. A separate poll by Bright Blue found in April 2017 that [63% of Conservative voters support a ban on GM crops.](#)

GM Regulation in Europe

[EU Directive 2001/18/EC](#) controls the cultivation, import and sale of GMOs in the EU. It explicitly recognises the precautionary principle and the fact that, because living organisms reproduce, the impact of their release into the environment may be irreversible. It respects the importance of ethical concerns about GMOs, requires a case-by-case environmental risk assessment prior to release, and imposes measures to ensure the traceability of all GMOs released.

In contrast, the US follows the principle of “substantial equivalence” which can be roughly translated as “if it looks like a duck and you say it quacks like a duck we won't ask any awkward questions”.

Informed consumers

The EU directive, and the regulations that put it into practice, require the labelling of products containing GMOs. [A GfK NOP poll](#) found that 89% of people in the UK want GM products to be clearly labelled and 72% were willing to pay extra for non-GM food.

Despite some [92 GM “events” being approved for use in food sold for human consumption across the EU](#), GM foods are a rare sight on our supermarket shelves because consumers simply won't buy products that they know to contain GM ingredients. In contrast, GM animal feed (for which an almost identical list of GM traits is approved in the EU) has [quietly become the norm](#) for the simple reason that its use does not have to be mentioned on the label of the meat, eggs, dairy products and farmed fish it helps to produce.

Looking to the US?

The situation in the United States could not be more different. Despite several bills intended to establish GM product labelling in the US, consumers are still largely in the dark and the inclusion of GM soya, maize (particularly as high fructose corn syrup) and oil seed rape (known as canola in the US) is almost universal in non-organic processed foods. Those in any doubt about the impact of labelling should consider the fact that [companies selling GM foods in the US have spent the best part of \\$100 million in recent years to oppose laws that would compel them to tell their customers exactly what's in their products.](#)

Even if the need to trade with the EU keeps UK-produced foods GM-free, losing the requirement to label GM products on our own supermarket shelves would make [the recent fad for imported US candy, cereal and calorie-laden sweet treats](#), feel like a drop in the ocean. Iconic products like Kellogg's cornflakes are sold in a GM version across the US but made without GM ingredients for the EU market. Without GM labels they could quickly flood the UK market and consumers would lose their right to make informed choices.

Disagreement across the UK

In 2015, Directive (EU) 2015/412 came into effect, allowing EU member states and “regions” with competent authority status to restrict or prohibit the cultivation of GMOs in their territory. [All three of the UK's devolved nations took up the offer as soon as it was made available](#). Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland joined seventeen countries (including France and Germany) and the Belgian region of Wallonia by signing up to ban the one GM crop currently permitted to be grown in the EU and the seven other crops that were, at the time, in the authorisation pipeline.

What needs to happen?

Pollen, GM or otherwise, is as likely to respect a farmer's fence, or indeed a national boundary, as it is to turn left at a roundabout. That means that we can only protect farmers right to choose, and our devolved nations' right to determine their own farming policy, by establishing truly **effective measures to prevent contamination**.

Information allows people to take control of what they are buying and eating. That means that we can only protect consumers' right to make informed choices by retaining our **GM labels** and extending them to cover products from GM-fed animals.

GM crops are linked with reductions in biodiversity, the rise of superweeds, the transfer of power from family farmers to multinational corporations and some of the most environmentally damaging practices in modern agriculture. That means we can only prevent potentially irreversible damage to our communities and our ecosystem by securing a **robust and transparent process for authorising the use GMOs** in any form, throughout the UK.

To protect vital safeguards and our right to choose, the EU Withdrawal (Repeal) Bill must:

- Retain the precautionary principle, the principle that preventive action should be taken, that environmental damage be rectified at source and that the polluter should pay.
- Confirm that there will be no changes to the operation of Directive 2001/18/EC, Regulation (EC) No 1829/2003, Regulation (EC) 1830/2003 or Directive (EU) 2015/412 without full and proper parliamentary scrutiny, including in all devolved administrations.
- Set out effective new arrangements for good food governance.

To protect the integrity of our food, our farms and our crops, the UK trade and agriculture bills must:

- Maintain an approvals process that prevents the release of genetically engineered material into the environment without a rigorous and independent, case by case risk assessment.
- Respect the precautionary principle.
- Recognise the validity of social, economic and ethical impacts of different ways of growing and producing our food.
- Protect consumers' right to make an informed choice through a UK-wide requirement to label food containing GM ingredients and food derived from animals that have been fed GM crops.
- Protect farmers, growers and food producers by establishing and maintaining robust measures to prevent contamination of non-GM crops, food and feed with GM material of any kind. This includes operating an effective 'polluter pays' liability regime that will ensure fair compensation for UK farmers, growers and any other business impacted in the event of contamination with GM material of any kind.

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