

NOTTINGHAM GMO DEBATE – June 2nd 2003

The Organisers

The debate was organised by three local forums: The Food Initiatives Group (FIG), Health in Your Environment (HIYE), and Nottingham Health Action Group (NHAG).

All three forums have the common theme of improving our health and environment in Greater Nottingham and all have their roots in the Local Agenda 21 health strategy developed in 1996.

HIYE is a forum made up of representatives from voluntary and community organisations with support from the Primary Care Trusts and the Universities.

FIG is a multi-sector food partnership whose aim is to encourage and enable organisations and individuals to produce and eat safe, healthy, affordable food from sustainable sources including locally grown and organic food.

NHAG covers a broader range of health and environment issues. It is a partnership that includes representatives from Local Authorities, Health, Voluntary and Private Sectors. Both FIG and HIYE are forums that were spawned by NHAG, and NHAG continues to support their work

Aims of the event

There has been a growing local interest in the issue of Genetically Modified Organisms (GMOs) and their impact upon the environment and human health. HIYE and FIG both prioritised this topic as an issue that they wanted to explore, so a GMO debate was organized to allow local people to explore the issues surrounding GMOs further.

The aims of this event were:

1. To provide local people with information about the scientific arguments for and against GMOs.
2. To provide a forum for local people to discuss and explore the issues further
3. To capture local people's views and concerns in a report, to inform HIYE and FIG strategies and practice locally, and to the Government and local MP's to inform the Public GM debate nationally

Who attended:

40 people attended the debate. They included concerned consumers, a local organic retailer, a local organic farmer, University lecturers, Local Authorities, the National Farmers Union, health professionals, local environmental voluntary groups, Friends of the Earth, Monsanto and CropGen.

Format of the day:

The session ran from 10.30am – 3.00pm.

The session was introduced and chaired by John Taylor, Chair of NHAG and Non-executive Director of Trent Strategic Health Authority

Helen Ross, Chair of FIG then gave some background to the event, and the organisations who had planned it.

In the morning two national speakers did presentations to address the current scientific evidence of the value and safety of GM technology.

The speakers were:

Professor Conrad Lichtenstein: Professor of Molecular Biology, School of Biological Sciences, Queen Mary, University of London, and member of CropGen. CropGen is a consumer and media information initiative, whose mission is to make the case for GM crops.

Dr Mae-Wan Ho: director and founder of the Institute for Science in Society (ISIS) and scientific advisor to the Third World Network. ISIS is a not-for-profit organisation working for social responsibility and sustainable approaches to science.

After lunch there was a workshop session. The aim of the workshop was to explore the issues raised in the morning session and to :

Agree three questions to put to the speakers

Identify three key issues the group would like to be addressed locally and nationally concerning GM technology

This was followed by a plenary session, where each group put their questions to the panel.

QUESTIONS AND ISSUES RAISED IN THE WORKSHOPS, WHICH WERE EXPLORED FURTHER IN THE PLENERY SESSIONS:

1. How do we know that GM technology is safe for human health and the environment? Reference was made to the fact that many of the safety trials are in controlled conditions, but do not address the issue of what happens when GM organisms are released into complex environmental systems. Also there was a lack of faith in the adequacy of tests for safety for human health, since the tests are only performed over the short term and do not address the impact on human health after many years.
2. There was a concern that systems using GMOs are not compatible with organic systems of growing. Can you ever have both systems existing together?
3. Who is it that actually wants GM technology, and who is it that really stands to gain from it? The group felt that many consumers didn't want GM food, and that the drive was mainly from industry, to gain control over markets and for profit.
4. How far should the "precautionary principle"* be taken with GM crops and technology?
5. Labelling. Exactly what information should go on to the products we purchase, so that consumers can make informed choices?
6. Liability issues. If GMOs are found to be damaging to human health and the environment, who is liable if things go wrong?
7. Gene transference is unnatural, can it really be controlled?
8. If any new thing is introduced quickly into a natural system, does natural selection have the capacity to deal with it?

** The Precautionary Principle has been defined as follows:*

"When an activity raises threats of harm to human health or the environment, precautionary measures should be taken, even if some cause and effect relationships are not fully established scientifically"

*Anderson L 'Genetic Engineering, Food and our Environment' 1999
ISBN 1870098*

The points the group identified to go to local and national strategies were:

1. The GMO debate needs to be widened beyond a focus on GM crops, to a broader discussion about what we want out of agriculture in terms of the social and environmental impact.
2. There needs to be more unbiased, accessible information available to the general public, so that they can make an informed decision about their view on GMOs and their future development.
3. More research needs to be undertaken into the long-term impact of GMOs on human health.
4. Who is going to be liable if GM technology is found to be unsafe? There is a serious concern that profits from GM will accrue with corporations, while the costs of any problems will fall to the public purse.
5. There is a great deal of inconsistency from the two sides of the debate about the impact of GMOs on health and the environment. The public need more consistent information about this.
6. There is a concern that GM will be used to “grow” pharmaceuticals. This issue needs to be explored more fully.

Media coverage of the event:

The event was publicised in the following media:

- Radio 4 ‘Today’ programme –Tuesday 3rd June 2003
- BBC National news – breakfast and lunchtime – Tuesday 3rd June 2003
- Nottingham Evening Post – Tuesday 27th May 2003
- Nottingham Evening Post – Tuesday 3rd June 2003