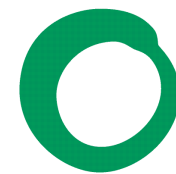


GM-free areas – your right to decide



Friends of the Earth

A guide to the GM-free areas petition for local authorities and politicians

Introduction

Decisions about whether GM crops should be grown in the UK are being made right now, but the communities where the crops could be grown have no right to be involved. Instead, GM approvals are being forced through by the unelected European Commission. There are already steps local authorities can take if they want to prevent GM crops being grown locally, but to ensure local decision-making a change in EU law is necessary.

This briefing explains why this change needs to happen now. It also sets out how local authorities, local councillors and other politicians can be part of a growing movement across Europe calling for local decision-making on GM crops.



What is the GM-free areas petition?

The GM-free areas petition was launched in January 2005 by a coalition of organisations from 20 European countries¹, and in partnership with the Assembly of European Regions (AER).² The petition calls for local authorities to be given the democratic and legal right to decide whether or not GM crops can be grown in their area. It will be presented to the European Commission at the end of 2005. Local authorities and politicians across Europe are being asked to sign the petition, which is a unique opportunity to be part of a Europe-wide movement calling for local decision-making on GM crops.

Why is it relevant to your local authority?

GM crops could affect your local economy and environment. Consumer opposition to GM remains firm – the most recent surveys have shown that opposition is actually increasing. There is great concern that contamination from GM crops will make it difficult to produce non-GM and organic crops, and some GM crops have the potential to cross pollinate and contaminate native plants. The results of the Government's farm scale evaluations of GM weedkiller-resistant crops showed that the way in which GM oilseed rape and sugar beet were grown caused harm to farmland wildlife.

Despite this, current EU law is weak and offers little support for areas wanting to stay GM-free. Once a GM crop has been approved through the EU applications process it can be grown anywhere in the EU.

This means GM crops could be grown in your area without the local authority or community being involved in the decision, even though there could be significant impacts on the local environment and economy.

Why now?

Decisions are being made right now about whether to approve GM crops. Biotechnology companies are pushing to get GM into Europe, and pressure from the US, via a GM dispute at the World Trade Organisation, has already resulted in the European Commission approving imports of new GM foods. There are a number of new applications to grow GM crops in Europe and decisions on these are likely to be made over the next 12 months.

There is a good opportunity to change the law. Co-existence between GM and non-GM crops is currently a high profile issue in Europe, and many member states are drawing up national legislation. The new Agriculture Commissioner has said there is a need for EU-wide standards, which will require new EU-wide measures. This provides a unique opportunity to get legal backing for GM-free areas into European law. A petition from local governments will be extremely influential to these discussions.

The movement across Europe is now large enough to have real influence in Brussels. In the UK, 60 local authorities have passed resolutions opposing GM crops and food in their areas.³ In Europe, more than 100 regions (of recognised “European Region” status⁴) and more than 3500 other areas have now declared themselves GM-free, and there are GM-free initiatives in virtually every European country. The AER and the European Network of GM-Free Regions are calling for legal backing for GM-free areas. The fact that so many local areas and regions in Europe want to protect themselves from GM crops presents a unique opportunity to lobby the European Commission for a change in EU law.

How does this affect local authorities that have passed GM-free resolutions?

Signing the petition builds on any local authority resolutions opposing GM crops.

The GM-Free Britain campaign has to date focused on what local authorities can do within the current legislative framework. This includes banning GM crops on council owned land, banning GM food in council services, and applying, under EU law (Article 19⁵), to prevent GM crops being grown in their local area. The Article 19 approach is currently the only legal option available to local authorities wanting to stay GM-free and applications have to be made to the European Commission on a crop-by-crop basis.

When asked to go GM-free some councils have responded that they do not have the power to stop GM crops being grown in their area. If the petition is successful, it will give local authorities the power to make decisions about whether GM crops can be grown locally or not.

Friends of the Earth is still committed to supporting local authorities in making their case under Article 19 to apply to be excluded from the consent to grow GM crops on a case-by-case basis when the opportunities arise.

How could GM crops affect your area?

The commercial growing of GM crops is likely to cause environmental, social, economic and practical problems across the country, but the areas where the crops are grown will be worst affected.

1. Impact on local farmers and the local economy

Once GM crops are grown in an area, farmers growing conventional or organic crops could struggle. Pollen and seeds from GM crops could be spread by bees or the wind to nearby areas, and local farmers could find that their food can no longer be sold as non-GM, while organic farmers could lose their organic status.

New research continues to show the surprising distances pollen can travel – a Government sponsored study found that cross pollination of oilseed rape plants could occur over 26km.⁶ But with respect to coexistence the UK Government looks likely to support weak measures that could lead to widespread contamination of non-GM crops. Insurance companies are not willing to provide insurance cover for farmers considering growing GM crops, or non-GM farmers seeking to protect their business from GM contamination.⁷

In the US, Monsanto has been using heavy-handed investigations and ruthless prosecutions to sue farmers over the use of its GM seed, even where fields have been accidentally contaminated.⁸

2. Impact on the local environment

If GM crops are grown in your area, the local environment may also suffer:

- The Government sponsored farmscale trials showed that in three of the four crops tested (beet, winter and spring oilseed rape), growing the GM crops with the associated weedkiller was more damaging to farmland wildlife than growing the conventional crop.⁹ Fewer beneficial plants and insects were found in the GM fields and the RSPB is concerned that depleting these food sources for farmland birds, such as the skylark, would have negative impacts on their already declining populations.¹⁰
- In the US, researchers have found that GM crops can pass genes to related plants, making stronger weeds¹¹, and in Canada GM oilseed rape weeds have appeared that are resistant to three herbicides.¹² In both cases, farmers might need to resort to more damaging chemicals to control the resistant weeds. In the UK, wild plants that cross-breed with oilseed rape and beet occur throughout the country.¹³
- Protected plants found in arable areas could be threatened by the introduction of GM herbicide tolerant crops because of the indiscriminate weed killers used.¹⁴

What does the public think?

The public remains deeply opposed to GM crops and food.

- A Which? survey in 2004 showed that attitudes against GM have hardened since 2002, with 61 per cent of people concerned about the use of GM in food production.¹⁵
- In the GM Nation? public debate in 2003, in-depth research suggested that when people in the general population become more engaged in GM issues, and choose to discover more about them, they harden their attitudes against GM.¹⁶
- A number of local authorities have conducted their own research – Kent County Council found that 83 per cent of respondents were concerned about the potential negative impact of GM crops on the environment¹⁷, and Shropshire County Council found 94 per cent of local people were against commercially growing GM crops.¹⁸

Who can sign the GM-Free areas petition?

Local authorities – A representative, such as the leader of the council, or Chair of the Environment Committee, should sign and stamp the petition on behalf of the local authority. This will show that the whole council supports the call for local decision-making on GM crops. Any tier of local government can sign the petition, including regional assemblies, county, unitary, district, town and parish councils.

Politicians – Individual councillors, as well as any other politicians, such as MPs, MEPs, Welsh AMs and MSPs can also sign the petition to show support in their personal capacity.

What does signing the petition commit local authorities and politicians to?

Signing the petition does not commit local authorities and politicians to any additional work. Signing up simply means that your authority or you individually support the demands of the petition and are adding your voice to calls for decisions over GM crops to be taken locally, in the directly affected areas.

How do we sign up and when is the deadline?

Petitions can be downloaded from www.gmofree-europe.org. Signed copies should be returned to Kenneth Richter, Friends of the Earth, 26-28 Underwood Street, London N1 7JQ, or faxed to 020 7490 0881. The deadline for sending in petitions is the end of November 2005.

There is no online signup, as this could be open to false information being submitted. Details of local authorities and politicians signing the petition will be held centrally by Friends of the Earth, and the signatures will be handed to the European Commission at the end of 2005.

What would it mean if the legislation were achieved?

The legislation must give Member States, regional and local authorities the ability to exclude certain areas from the cultivation of GM crops, if they go through a democratic process which concludes that growing GM crops would threaten the environment, farming and food production that the area wants to promote and protect. The law should be in the form of a Directive that is voted on by the full European Parliament.

What else can local authorities do?

There are already concrete steps local authorities can take to prevent GM crops being grown in your area. You can put in place policies to:

- Ban GM crops on council land
- Ban GM foods in council services
- Apply under EU legislation to have GM crops excluded from your area, on a crop-by-crop basis. See *Now or Never* (below) for a sample resolution.

Useful resources

www.gmofree-europe.org – GM-Free Europe website with an interactive map of GM-free areas in Europe, lots of campaign information and petitions to download

www.gmfreebritain.com – GM-Free Britain website

www.foe.co.uk/resource/reports/now_never.pdf – *Now or Never: why you should make your area GM free*

Contacts

For further information please contact:

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Liz Wright, Campaign Assistant, on 0113 2428153 or email lizw@foe.co.uk

¹ NGOs supporting the petition are Friends of the Earth Europe, Save Our Seeds, Global 2000 (Austria), Velt (Belgium), Natur & Progres Belgique (Belgium), Friends of the Earth Cyprus, Stenava Association (Czech Republic), People's Biosafety Association (Finland), Les Amis de la Terre (France), BUND (Germany), Greek Network Against GMOs, Greenpeace Greece, ETK (Hungary), GM-free Ireland, Coldiretti (Italy), Legambiente (Italy), Alternativa Demokratika (Malta), Milieudéfensie (Netherlands), ICPPC (Poland), Quercus (Portugal), CEPA/Friends of the Earth SK (Slovak Republic), Umanotera (Slovenia), EHNE (Basque Country, Spain), Friends of the Earth England Wales & Northern Ireland, Munlochy GM Vigil (Scotland)

² The AER represents 250 member regions from 30 countries at a European and international level. Members in the UK are Devon, Dorset, Fife, Gloucestershire, Hampshire, Somerset, and West Sussex County Councils. See www.are-regions-europe.org/

³ www.gmfreebritain.com

⁴ In the UK, local authorities immediately below the level of central government, eg county councils, are recognised as European Regions

⁵ Article 19 of the Deliberate Release Directive (2001/18/EC) is a legal tool that local authorities can use on a case-by-case basis to apply to have a condition attached to a marketing consent for a GM crop, preventing it from being grown in a specific geographical area. It can not be used to get a blanket ban on all future marketing consents for GM crops.

⁶ Ramsay G, Thompson C, Squire G (2003). Quantifying landscape-scale gene flow in oilseed rape. <http://www.defra.gov.uk/environment/gm/research/epg-rg0216.htm>

⁷ FARM press release 7 October 2003. No one will insure GM crops. http://www.farm.org.uk/FM_Content.aspx?ID=138

⁸ Kimbrell A & Mendelson J (2004). Monsanto vs US Farmers. Center for Food Safety.

⁹ Philosophical Transactions of Royal Society London B. (2003) Vol 358: 1773-1913; Proceedings of the Royal Society B. Vol 272: 463-474

¹⁰ RSPB press release 22 March 2005. Tests show GM crop could hasten decline of farmland birds. <http://www.rspb.org.uk/countryside/farming/policy/GMOs/news/hasten.asp>

¹¹ Ohio State University press release, 8 August 2002. Genetically modified crops may pass helpful traits to weeds, study finds

¹² Gene-stacking in herbicide tolerant oilseed rape: lessons from the North American experience English Nature research report No. 443

¹³ Keeping your area GM free and associated regional information maps http://www.foe.co.uk/campaigns/real_food/resource/local.html

¹⁴ Keeping your area GM free and associated regional information maps http://www.foe.co.uk/campaigns/real_food/resource/local.html

¹⁵ Which? Magazine, 12 September 2004

¹⁶ www.gmnation.org

¹⁷ www.kent.gov.uk/your-council/gm-nation/survey.html

¹⁸ GM Nation? The Shropshire Debate. [http://www.shropshire.gov.uk/qualitylife.nsf/viewAttachments/DOC-B9275AC11DE7F25080256CA2003AC027/\\$file/GM%20Nation%20-%20The%20Shropshire%20Debate.pdf](http://www.shropshire.gov.uk/qualitylife.nsf/viewAttachments/DOC-B9275AC11DE7F25080256CA2003AC027/$file/GM%20Nation%20-%20The%20Shropshire%20Debate.pdf)

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