

The Battle against GMO: Scotland Bans Genetically Modified Crops

By [The Ecologist](#)

Global Research, August 11, 2015

[The Ecologist](#) 10 August 2015

Region: [Europe](#)

Theme: [Biotechnology and GMO](#)

Scotland's small-scale farmers have welcomed their government's decision to prevent the growing of GM crops, aimed at enhancing the country's 'clean, green status', among a coalition of green NGOs.

We want to see food for people at the heart of Scotland's vision for agriculture. Diversity of crops and food, farming with nature, not against nature, and short food chains are the keys to Scotland becoming a good food nation.

Farmers will not be allowed to grow genetically modified (GM) crops in Scotland, Rural Affairs Secretary Richard Lochhead announced over the weekend.

The Scottish Government intends to take advantage of new EU rules allowing countries to opt out of growing EU-authorized GM crops, he said, in effect making Scotland's long-standing and widely supported moratorium on GMOS permanent.

"Scotland is known around the world for our beautiful natural environment - and banning growing genetically modified crops will protect and further enhance our clean, green status", he said.

There is no evidence of significant demand for GM products by Scottish consumers and I am concerned that allowing GM crops to be grown in Scotland would damage our clean and green brand, thereby gambling with the future of our £14 billion food and drink sector.

The Scottish Government will shortly submit a request that Scotland is excluded from any European consents for the cultivation of GM crops, including the variety of genetically modified maize already approved and six other GM crops that are awaiting authorisation.

The risks outweigh any potential benefits

The move has been welcomed by the Scottish Crofting Federation, which represents the nation's small-scale farmers, together with other civil society organisations who penned an open letter of support to the Scottish government:

We underline the precautionary principle that the Scottish Government upholds - that the potential risks from GMOs to public health and our environment outweigh any potential benefits of the technology. As stakeholders in Scotland's food system, we recognise the importance of protecting and enhancing Scotland's reputation for good, clean food.

We are aware that many of our major export customers have concerns about GM, while many EU member states including Germany and France are likely to join Scotland in opting out of GM food growing. We note that Scotland's world-class seed potato industry cannot afford any risk to its reputation for high quality seed - which includes many blight resistant varieties developed through conventional breeding techniques.

The letter concludes with a critique of the effects of GM crops and the way they have been used, mainly in the US, Canada and South America, over the last 20 years. The technology, the NGOs say,

- concentrates power and control in the global food system, with a handful of companies dominating the market for seeds and pesticides
- makes small farmers run faster to stand still, increasing input costs for seed and herbicides while global commodity prices are falling
- reduces diversity of food, seeds and plants and the resilience of local food economies
- has stolen the limelight from other more viable, less risky scientific solutions for more sustainable modes of production and distribution of food.

Food for people - not a commodity for profit

They stress that they are "*not against science*" - their opposition arises because "*with good reason we do not trust the claims made by corporations with a vested interest in controlling our food system.*"

The letter also sets out a vision of agriculture very different to that of large scale commercial farming promoted by the UK government in England, not only as regards GMOs but in its broader purpose and philosophy.

We encourage the Scottish Government to build on this decision by supporting closer co-operation between Scotland's farmers, growers, fisherfolk, and Scotland's people to tackle the central challenge of ensuring that everyone can feed themselves and their family well, without degrading the environment.

"We want to see food for people - rather than food as a commodity - at the heart of Scotland's vision for agriculture. Diversity of crops and food, farming with nature, not against nature, and short food chains between producers and citizens are the keys to Scotland becoming a good food nation - and a global contributor to fair and sustainable food for all.

As well as the Scottish Crofting Federation, signatories on the letter include Nourish Scotland, Friends of the Earth Scotland, Global Justice Now, Unite, Common Good Food, CommonWeal, Compassion in World Farming and Scotland's Allotments and Gardens Society.

Standing out in favour of GMO crops was the National Farmers Union Scotland, whose president Allan Bowie said: "*It is very disappointing. We thought they had possibly started to understand the potential benefits. The hope was to have open discussion and allow science to show the pros and cons for all of us to understand either the potential benefits or potential downsides. What we have now is that our competitors will get any benefits and we have to try and compete. It is rather naïve.*"

But Richard Lochhead insisted that the move was in the interests of Scotland's economy, consumers and farming sector: *"The Scottish Government has long-standing concerns about GM crops - concerns that are shared by other European countries and consumers, and which should not be dismissed lightly.*

I firmly believe that GM policy in Scotland should be guided by what's best for our economy and our own agricultural sector rather than the priorities of others.

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