



PRESS RELEASE: Embargoed until 00:01 9th March 2012

**NEW SURVEY SHOWS UK PUBLIC PERSPECTIVES ON GM CROPS.
A SHIFT TO THE MIDDLE GROUND?**

London, (*Embargoed until 00.01 Friday 9th March*)

Against the backdrop of increased calls for public debate on the genetic modification of crops, the British Science Association has today revealed the results of an independent study into the public attitudes that surround the divisive issue of the benefits and risks of genetically modifying our food.

The results were revealed at the national launch of National Science & Engineering Week. As part of this study, respondents were questioned about their attitude to the genetic modification of food crops. Participants were given a range of possible applications of gene modifying technology, and asked whether they would support the use of gene technology for that purpose. As part of the National Science & Engineering Week launch, a panel of experts were invited to discuss the implications of the study findings, and compare the results to public attitude surveys which have taken place over the last ten years.

Examples such as the production of bio-fortified rice crops with enhanced levels of vitamin A, received widespread support. Enhanced levels of vitamin A can help protect against malnutrition and the potential for associated blindness, thought to affect over 100 million children globally.

These crops, already produced by projects such as the Golden Rice Project – were viewed favourably by the public, with a significant majority supporting the use. A quarter of respondents were neither supportive nor unsupportive, or expressed their views as “don’t know”.

Similarly, the concept of producing wheat crops with reduced susceptibility to aphids, thereby reducing the need for pesticides, was also relatively well received. Again, a majority supported the idea, with around a quarter who were ambivalent, or didn’t know.

Professor Joyce Tait, Scientific Advisor at the ESRC Innogen Centre, taking part in the panel debate commented; “There seems to have been a move away from the extremes, to the middle ground, with answers often being categorised as “don’t know”. That neutral ground seemed to happen across

the board, across questions, whether it was 'should GM be encouraged', or whether it helped the UK economy, to whether it is safe for future generations - there seems to have been a migration to this middle ground. I didn't see that as a challenge to do more public engagement, rather I saw that to mean that it was becoming less contentious"

The potential benefits these applications are striving to achieve, either to developing nations, or to the environment seem clear on the face of it, though alternatives were not presented in the survey. In other examples, public support for genetic modification was much lower. A minority supported the idea of genetically modifying carnation crops, to provide new colours for sale to consumers. Similarly, only a quarter were in favour of delaying the ripening of cantaloupe melons to increase their shelf life.

The application of genetic modification of sugar beet to make it resistant to herbicides, likely to increase productivity of farms - proved to be a middle ground - with nearly a half supportive, and a quarter not supporting the idea.

Professor Maurice Moloney, Chief Executive of Rothamsted Research Institute, the longest running agricultural research station in the world, was also part of the debate. He commented; "The entire science community will applaud the work of the British Science Association in conducting a well-structured and statistically-valid survey. These data are extremely helpful in assessing the evolving view of the general public to GM technology and products. The survey suggests that the UK public is interested in the end uses and real benefits of GM technology, rather than harbouring blanket scepticism."

Disagreeing with Professor Tait, he commented "The large number of 'neither agree nor disagree' answers suggests that scientists still have much work to do in public engagement, if the UK public are to benefit to the same extent as the 29 other countries who currently grow GM crops commercially."

A further finding of the study was that men and women differed in their outlook, with more men supporting the every use of genetic modification listed in the survey. Where 67% of men supported the development of vitamin-enhanced rice, only 60% of women did. The smallest divide between the sexes related to carnation modification - with 23% of men supporting the idea, and 21% of women.

Whilst these polls suggest the public are willing to accept the production of GM foods in certain applications there is still much debate when it comes to the acceptability of pursuing GM crops as a mainstream method of food production. 27% of those questioned, agree or strongly agree that the production of GM food should be encouraged, whilst 30% disagreed, or strongly disagreed with this sentiment. Indeed 30% agree that developing GM foods is wrong in principle. By far the most common response, however, was that the respondents "neither agree nor disagree", similarly 44% "don't

know" whether GM food is good for the UK economy. An even greater number expressed uncertainty over whether GM food is safe for future generations; 48% don't know, whilst only 24% agree, and 27% disagree.

Tom Macmillan, from the Soil Association, a leading membership charity campaigning for healthy, humane and sustainable food, farming and land use, believes there should now be a different focus for public attention; "This survey repeats questions people were first asked a decade ago. While that might be an interesting academic exercise, in practice the world has moved on in those ten years, to new areas of research and innovation, so it is a real throwback to focus on GM. Where we haven't yet seen enough progress is in tackling the democratic deficit at the heart of British research policy, which leaves the public, small businesses and farmers little say in the research that is done with their money and in their name."