

Impacts of GM Crops on Health and the Environment. How Britain's Royal Society Covers Up the Scientific Evidence

Soil Association response to 'GM Plants: Questions and Answers' - The Royal Society

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This Royal Society document about GM crops, like every other one they have issued over the last nearly 20 years, argues in favour of GM. Everyone knows that there are at least some scientific controversies, and disagreements about evidence concerning GM crops. None of these are mentioned in the Royal Society document. This may not be surprising, given that there are no scientists who have consistently expressed scepticism about the application of GM technology to agriculture listed among the authors. Scientific enquiry normally proceeds by open discussion of disagreements about evidence - the Royal Society's involvement in GM has been consistently one-sided, ignoring scientists with dissenting views, and overlooking facts which do not fit with the views of supporters of GM crops.

For example, in this latest document, on page 17, there are glaring omissions in the brief discussion of one of the two most widely grown GM crops, those with the Bt insecticide engineered into the plant. Figures are given for claimed reduction in insecticide use as a result of the use of these GM crops, but no acknowledgement is made of the large quantity of insecticide effectively present in all of the GM Bt crops that are grown worldwide - so the figure given for an alleged reduction in insecticide use is misleading. Nor is there any mention of an unexpected impact of the use of these GM crops, namely the emergence of new insect pests to take the place of those killed by the Bt insecticide in the crop - these new pests have proved more difficult to kill than the one they replaced. Finally, no mention is made of the unfolding tragedy of GM Bt cotton use in India, where there have been widespread crop failures due to attacks by the pink bollworm, which GM Bt cotton has proved unable to resist. This is leading to widespread moves away from GM cotton seeds in India, often with the support of State governments.

On page 18, the document reports on where GM crops are grown worldwide, without noting that these figures come from a GM industry source. Although figures for 2015 are cited, no mention is made of the significant fact that, for the first time in 15 or more years, there was a slight decrease in the area of GM crops grown worldwide in 2015.

On page 20, there is a discussion about the use of GM soya in animal feed. The reports suggest that only the UK supermarket Waitrose is able to guarantee that some of its meat and dairy products come from animals fed GM soya. However, the Royal Society omits much

more significant information, for example that non-GM soya imports to the EU are now increasing, because supermarkets in countries like Germany and France are moving away from the use of GM animal feed. It also omits to mention that more US farmers are now growing non-GM soya, because of increasing demand. The Royal Society simply tells you that tens of millions tons of GM soya and maize are exported every year from North and South America, and that 90% of imported soya is GM.

On page 22, the Royal Society claims that GM food is 'safe' – going on to explain that there is no evidence that it is unsafe. No evidence that something is unsafe is not same as evidence that it is safe – this is basic scientific error, confusing absence of evidence with evidence of absence. For example, proponents of GM regularly claim that the fact that GM food has been eaten in America for 20 years shows that it is safe, despite the fact that during the same period that GM food has been eaten in America, diet -related ill health amongst American citizens has increased dramatically. However, just because things happen at the same time, does not mean one causes the other. Also, until somebody does some research, we have no idea if the widespread consumption of GM food in the USA has had health consequences or not.

On page 25, the Royal Society neatly illustrates another trick that GM proponents have played over the years, when scientific evidence of harm has been difficult to explain away. In this case, the Royal Society looks at evidence of environmental damage associated with GM crops, something which a large-scale, five-year study funded by the UK government established beyond doubt. The Royal Society's answer is to say that this is nothing to do with GM crops, but simply a result of 'farming practice'. It is clear just how disingenuous this is, from the fact that every time this document claims some advantage for GM crops, it turns out that this is entirely because of GM, and nothing to do with farming practice. However, when there is clear evidence of damage, it's nothing to do with GM, and all down to what farmers do.

Despite efforts to present their pro-GM arguments as neutral and unbiased, the scientific establishment in the UK seems incapable of following normal scientific practice when dealing with GM crops. Scientists with differing views are excluded from the production of documents of this sort, dissenting views are ignored, and inconvenient facts are either omitted completely or misrepresented – or as a last resort, blamed on farmers not GM.

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