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## GM food: Monster or saviour?

By Jeremy Cooke  
BBC News

**I have to confess, until now the whole debate about genetically-modified (GM) food has pretty much passed me by.**

Most of my career has been spent as a foreign correspondent.

But last summer I returned to the UK to start a new job with the BBC. I now glory in the title Rural Affairs Correspondent.

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Lord Dick Taverne with the case for GM food

A big part of my new brief is to report on farming. It is my (sometimes painful) duty to attend agriculture conferences and seminars. I also meet many farmers on their farms.

And over the months, time and time again the issue of GM has been raised.

I have been left in no doubt that many UK farmers - and others in the food production industry - think that GM is an important tool which can improve their efficiency, but which has been denied to them.

All of this, you could argue, counts for very little. Of course, farmers want to increase yields, or get the same yield using less land, less sprays, less fertiliser.

And anyway, did not we as a nation make up our minds about GM almost a decade ago?

You remember: environmentalists successfully branded GM "Frankenstein Food" - they warned us of the dangers of contaminating our environment, and of unleashing powerful and unpredictable forces into the British countryside.

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Lord Peter Melchett with the case against GM food

As a nation we came down on their side of the argument. Although there is no law against growing GM in the UK, the regulations mean it is a hostile environment for the agri-business brigade. And so it remains.

So why go back to the debate? Well, two reasons strike me immediately.

The **first** is that - unlike 10 years ago - we are now gripped by a global food crisis. Where there were once grain mountains there are now shortages.

The **second** thing that has changed is the fact that in other parts of the world GM is now being grown in massive amounts. It is reckoned that an area twice the size of Britain is now under GM crops.

And guess what? There have so far been no reports of the environmental or human health disasters that we were all warned about.

So with that in mind, I set out with a question: is it time to rethink GM?

## AMERICA

Let us start in America.

While we in Europe have rejected growing GM crops, the United States has enthusiastically embraced the new technology.

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Inside the world's biggest GM company

Thousands of hectares of land are now covered in GM crops. Most meals consumed in America's ultimate consumer society will have some GM content.

It is something that Americans, generally, do not even think about. Certainly, throughout the four years my family and I spent in New York we must have eaten hundreds of meals containing GM in blissful ignorance.

The main GM food crops are soya - which produces important protein - and maize. Both have been genetically modified to produce bigger yields or the same yield for less input (less herbicide, insecticide, fertiliser).

And behind it all (or almost all of it) is the giant Monsanto corporation. A multi-billion dollar world-wide outfit that dominates the world of GM.

As a journalist, getting access to what the green lobby regards as the "heart of darkness" is not easy.

**The scientific case [for GM food] is very clear**

Hugh Grant  
Monsanto's chief executive

But after some gentle negotiating we were welcomed to St Louis, Missouri, Monsanto's global headquarters.

Here, some of the leading scientists in the field are working on ways to improve crops and yields.

Chatting to the technicians, you can tell they are a little bemused at being labelled the architects of "Frankenstein Foods". They say they simply want to make things more efficient for farmers - and so better for consumers.

The chief executive Hugh Grant, originally from Glasgow in Scotland, seems puzzled at the European distrust of GM technology.

"The scientific case is very clear. This does now get down to people saying 12 years have passed, now's the time to make some calls.

**I think that if farmers had real choices out here,**

**that they would do things differently**

Roger Parry  
US anti-GM food farmer

"Europe continues to wait, while countries like India aggressively move ahead, and British scientists fill their suitcases and come here to do this research because they can't do it at home," Mr Grant says.

Monsanto is happy to provide stats which say that at least 90% of the farmers they deal with are happy with their product.

But there is no ignoring the fact that Monsanto is a hugely controversial company.

In the US, I found that for some farmers the problem is not so much a distrust of GM technology, but rather the way, they say, it makes them fall under the complete control of the biotech giants.

On his farm in Missouri I met Roger Parry. An old school good ol' boy, complete with battered old pick-up truck and equally battered baseball hat.

He is one of the minority of US farmers resisting GM. He told me that the big business of biotech is making it tough for farmers to make their own decisions about what to grow. Almost all of the seed available is GM seed.

**HAVE YOUR SAY** Starvation and food shortages are caused by economic, not agricultural, factors James Uscroft, UK

"I think that if farmers had real choices out here, that they would do things differently. When it's time to plant, farmers are going to plant.

"If all you've got is genetically modified soybeans, and it's time for seed to go in the ground, that's what's going to go in the ground.

"So, it's the availability of supply, and if that's cut off, it's awful tough to go shopping around when the sun is shining and you've got a few days to get your seed in the ground," Mr Parry says.

We Europeans could (if we wanted to) view America's GM project as the biggest field trial in history.

Ten years down the line, there have been no reports of environmental problems caused by GM. Also there have been no reported cases of human illness because of eating GM food.

But does that mean we need GM? Does it mean that GM is safe?

**UK/EUROPE**

Back in Europe, there are some GM crops growing and the occasional field test, but red tape and activists mean that most crops - especially in the UK where there is no commercial GM - do not make it to market.

Scientists say they are being left behind. They say they could be forging ahead with GM crops specifically for European conditions.

Some small-scale research is being done, for instance, on developing a potato that is

resistant to blight. But it really does feel like small beer.

Clearly, the environment here is very different to America. Where Monsanto in Missouri opened their doors to us, researchers conducting the field trial of pest resistant spuds "somewhere in the UK" would not let us film.

It is frustrating, but who can really blame them? Bitter experience shows that once the word gets out that a GM field trial is under way, the environmentalists move in and destroy it.

I get the feeling that most people in Britain instinctively distrust "industrialised agriculture".

We would much rather think of farms that look like the idyllic 800 acres belonging to Lord Melchett of the Soil Association.

He believes that his organic methods are efficient enough and versatile enough to feed this country, and to feed the world.

**GM is probably a win-win solution for consumers  
and farmers alike**

Richard Lister  
British pig farmer

And he is 100% against GM crops. For him, the global food crisis and America's apparently trouble-free GM experience change nothing.

"It's good for very very large agri-business farmers, bad for everyone else, very risky for the environment, still a huge amount of unknowns.

"Added to which, we know we can achieve what the GM industry has always claimed by other means," Lord Melchett says.

That is certainly not the view of all British farmers.

In North Yorkshire, I met Richard Lister who is understandably a little confused about the UK policy on GM.

Richard is a pig farmer and feeds his stock on pellets which contain 20% soya. That soya is imported - much of it from the US - and so it will be GM.

Indeed, many of the animals that go to produce UK meat and dairy products will have been fed on GM.

Why then, asks Richard cannot he grow GM feed on his own farm?

"GM is probably a win-win solution for consumers and farmers alike," he says.

"First of all, GM is enabling farmers to grow more crop from the same amount of acreage in a world where we're struggling to feed the population. That has to be good. It's also enabling farmers to grow the crops with less use of insecticides, or fungicides or weed killers. Again, that's a green win. Together, I think it's technology for the future," Mr Lister says. Read Jeremy Cooke's second report on the GM debate:

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Published: 2008/05/29 17:12:03 GMT

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