

## Scratching the surface: why mandatory GMO feeding studies just do not make sense

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It's time to scratch the surface, and recognise that advanced plant breeding methods, including GM crops, can really make a positive impact, writes Julian Little.



Julian Little | *Photo credit: Europabio*

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Animal testing of cosmetics in Europe isn't fashionable, certainly not when it comes to consumer products like lipstick and eye shadow or face cream. It doesn't fit well with Europe's image as a global leader in animal welfare; and rightfully so.

That is why in 2013, the EU banned animal testing in cosmetics and earlier this month, the European Parliament called for a global ban. It's good to see Europe moving in the right direction. Of course the fight to end unnecessary animal suffering extends far beyond cosmetics, and into all sorts of areas, so

let's just scratch the surface.

Animal testing in Europe continues in a range of other fields, from chemicals to pharmaceuticals; sometimes because there are few or no alternatives in existence for evaluating product safety, but sometimes, also, for absolutely no remotely justifiable reason at all.

The latter is sadly the case for GMOs in Europe, where mandatory long term animal feeding studies have been deemed unnecessary not only by the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA), but by three separate EU funded projects involving a wide range of scientists exploring the issue in depth.

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Over €11 million of European taxpayers' money have already been spent over the past few years on these three projects alone. The results, presented in April 2018, concluded, yet again, that such studies provide no added value to the safety assessment.

But who is doing anything about it? It seems no one. When it comes to GM crops, politicians seem to stick to the mantra that it is worth doing just in case. Just in case of what? Europe imports over 30 million tonnes of GM soya beans each year to feed its farm animals, roughly the weight of the EU's human population.

In fact, each year millions of farm animals eat GM crops, and they have been doing so for almost two decades. But despite more than a generation of safe commercialisation of GM crops around the world, and over three trillion meals eaten, with no substantiated cases of harm, GMOs remain an area of contention, especially in Europe.

Other widely consumed non-GM products, coffee comes to mind, might not receive market authorisation if assessed in a similar way. Clearly our decisions as a society and individuals are not well-enough guided by science (let alone ethical considerations).

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The irony behind all of this is that GM crops not only already help feed the majority of EU farm animals that we depend on for a range of food products, they have undeniable potential to offer non-meat, nutritional sources for vegetarians and meat lovers alike.

From drought resistant sugar cane, to pest-resistant aubergines, from non-browning apples to low acrylamide potatoes, GM crops are already improving nutrition and food safety and helping to reduce waste in other parts of the world.

They are being used to produce healthier oils and maize with reduced levels of cancer-causing mycotoxins, and they hold promise to provide new sources of crop-based feed protein for the aquaculture industry, limiting the impact on our oceans.

Through increasing efficiency of production, they can also help to limit our impact on surrounding wildlife and forests, from the rainforests of Brazil to the plains of Canada. The list goes on, with wider applications possible or necessary to ward off diseases like banana wilt and citrus greening and preserve the Hawaiian papaya.

Ironically, despite these facts, some groups fund themselves by spreading disinformation about GMOs, capitalising whenever possible on scientifically invalidated publications or images that generate fear.

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They know how to manipulate and use disinformation to coerce a public that cares about cosmetics but maybe less so about affordable food or food security. In the case of GM crops, the reason for the legal requirement for animal studies originated from a scare study with rats that was widely mediatised before being retracted from publication and universally [rejected](#) [8] by all representative scientific institutions and regulators.

Let's end the hype and start trusting science. The endless and baseless efforts by individual activists to ban all forms of GMOs and continually demand more animal feeding trials only leads to higher costs of many food products, including those produced in the EU according to the EU's standards.

It is time to end the EU's unnecessary animal feeding studies, reduce animal testing where it is not needed generally, and allow GM crops to deliver a broader range of benefits.

From cotton swabs and t-shirts made with GM cotton to vegetarian burgers made with GM ingredients and other non-meat alternatives, it is time to embrace all forms of plant breeding innovation with its almost endless potential to contribute further to a more sustainable and animal friendly society.

Biotechnology more generally also harbours endless potential to contribute further to a more sustainable and animal friendly society: from developing new in vitro alternatives to animal testing to cultured meat and bio-fortified vegetables, biotechnology is on the forefront of sustainability.

It's time to scratch the surface, and recognise that advanced plant breeding methods, including GM crops, can really make a positive impact on our ability to supply the safe, high quality affordable food that we all want on our plates when it is time to eat.

### **About the author**

Julian Little is currently Head of Communications at Bayer Crop Science in the UK. A fellow of the Royal Society of Biology, he is also Deputy-Chair of the Agricultural Biotechnology Council in the UK, and Chair of the communications group at EuropaBio in Brussels.

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