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Press release – For immediate release



Public do not trust BBC experts, survey reveals

As the BBC faces an uncertain financial future, a new survey reveals that nearly 70% of the public do not trust the independence of experts featured on BBC programmes. The open survey, which looks into the impartiality of the BBC when it comes to the reporting of genetically modified food and farming, collated results from 1000 people. 667 of these said they did not trust the independence of the experts featured on programmes such as *Panorama*, *Countryfile* and Radio 4's *Today* programme.

The survey [1] comes in the wake of the *Panorama* programme, **GM Food – Cultivating Fear** which was broadcast on June 8th and claimed to explore a new generation of GM crops. However, the programme, presented by *Countryfile* reporter Tom Heap, pursued a pro-GM agenda and featured three 'experts' who have commercial associations with GM technology. For example:

- Professor Jonathan Jones, from the Sainsbury Laboratory, owns several GM patents. He is the co-founder of several biotech companies and owns a company established to commercialise GM crops.
- Anne Glover co-founded a biotech company before promoting GM technology in her recent role as chief scientific advisor to the EU President
- Mark Lynas, a pro-GM advocate, is employed as part of the Cornell University's programme to promote GMOs globally.

Nearly 90% of the people surveyed felt that academics, researchers and other so-called independent experts featured on BBC programmes should reveal their sources of income, corporate affiliations and whether or not they are patent holders, to the public before being interviewed on BBC programmes. Nearly three quarters of the respondents felt that BBC programming represented a pro-GM stance. As one respondent wrote:

"BBC News reports are very superficial and don't even attempt to independently investigate the downsides of GM, such as: potential health issues, increased use of pesticides, contamination of conventional/organic crops, pesticide resistance, whether advertised yields are achieved."

The comprehensive report on the survey also includes examples of other pro-GMO biased programmes which the BBC has broadcast stretching back to 2008, analysis of why the media continues to get this important topic so wrong, as well as an appendix of comments from respondents revealing that, far from being uninformed and fear-drive, those who oppose GMOs have many legitimate and well-informed concerns which they would like answered.

As if to underscore the importance of the report, this morning's Radio 4 *Today* programme (8th July) further provided evidence of a pro-GM bias.[2] In two slots, uncritical coverage of GM crops was presented. Two pro-GM researchers – Professor Johnathan Napier of Rothamsted Research, and Professor Joyce Tait of the Innogen Institute – were given Institute were given a “free ride in what amounted to a GM party political broadcast” according to Beyond GM Director Lawrence Woodward.

The pair were allowed to talk, without challenge, about the results of the initial trials of GM camelina, a GM crop engineered to produce omega-3 fish oils, and its potential use in the food system.

Woodward adds: “Interviewer Justin Webb did not ask a single critical question and Tait in particular was allowed to make factually incorrect and misleading claims about GM and opposition to it”.

The BBC's support for GM technology is at odds with recent public surveys, which reveal that the majority of the UK public do not want GM crops grown in the UK. Nor do they want GM food in their supermarkets. An open poll in the *Guardian* newspaper online reported in 2013 that [72% of readers said they do not believe GM food is either safe or beneficial](#). Six months later the *Guardian* ran another online open poll – should restrictions on GM crops be relaxed? – [71% said no](#). A BBC *Countryfile Magazine* open poll the previous year posed the question [Should GM crop trials be allowed to go ahead?](#) The online survey returned 7824 responses, 79% (6144) of whom said no and 21% (1680) said yes.

Pat Thomas, Director of Beyond GM, and lead author of the survey report says:

“As a journalist myself, I find the results of our survey concerning. In the GMO debate, the distance between what the media wants to report and what the public wants to know, and indeed needs to know, is becoming ever wider. The 2014 Science and Technology Committee report emphasised the need for broadcasters to review their own content on genetic modification and challenge whether they were getting the perspective and balance right across the broad context of other agricultural issues of food production and food security. This is a warning shot from an informed public and calls into question whether the BBC is fulfilling its own remit as a public service broadcaster.”

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REFERENCES

1. The survey, *Does The BBC Help Cultivate a Pro-GM Agenda in the UK?* was conducted by Beyond GM (www.beyond-gm.org) – a campaign organisation which raises awareness around genetically modified food and farming. It was open to the public from ran June 8 to June 13 when it reached a 1000 responses. The full survey results and report are available [here](#).
2. BBC Radio 4 *Today* programme on 8th July carried two pieces: the first featured Science & Environment Editor of *Today* Tom Feilden giving an account of research carried out by Rothamsted on a camelina (false flax) crop, genetically engineered to produce the

omega-3 fatty acids normally found in fish oil. The second, an interview conducted by journalist Justin Webb with Prof. Johnathan Napier of Rothamsted Research and Prof Joyce Tait of the Immogen Centre. No alternative views were presented in either slot.

NOTES TO EDITORS

- The UK currently does not grow GM crops but recent changes to EU regulations have mean they could be planted in England within the next few years. Government ministers have stated they will introduce “pragmatic rules” remove obstacles.
- A significant proportion of GM feed is fed to pigs, poultry and dairy cows. Products from these animals are not labelled “as fed with GM”
- Products containing GM ingredients are starting to creep onto UK supermarket shelves. These are particularly prevalent in the international aisles of large supermarkets, though some UK takeaway restaurants also now using GMO cooking oil – without complying with the law which says this must be stated on the menu. Fast food chain Dominoes recently revealed that its thin crust pizzas contain GMO ingredients.
- GM crops have been kept out the UK up until now by the European Union’s blockade on growing crops. However, in January this year legislation was passed that allowed each member state to decide for themselves whether to grow GM crops or not. The UK government is now likely to press ahead with growing genetically modified crops within the next eighteen months.
- The first GM crop likely to be grown in the UK is a herbicide-resistant maize – the same crop which has driven up pesticide use in the Americas and led to the emergence of resistant superweeds.

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