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Number of scientists who say GMOs not proven safe climbs to 231
Developer of first commercialised GM food says debate isn't over
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The number of scientists, physicians and legal experts who have signed the group statement, "No scientific consensus on GMO safety"[1] has climbed to 231 in just over a week – and it's still growing.

The number of initial signatories stood at almost 100 on the day the statement was released, 21 October. It has more than doubled since.

A recent signatory is Dr Belinda Martineau, former member of the Michelmore Lab at the UC Davis Genome Center, University of California, who helped commercialise the world's first GM whole food, the Flavr Savr tomato. Dr Martineau said:

"I wholeheartedly support this thorough, thoughtful and professional statement describing the lack of scientific consensus on the safety of genetically engineered (GM/GE) crops and other GM/GE organisms (also referred to as GMOs). Society's debate over how best to utilize the powerful technology of genetic engineering is clearly not over. For its supporters to assume it is, is little more than wishful thinking."

Another signatory, Dr Judy Carman, director of the Institute of Health and Environmental Research, Adelaide, and adjunct associate professor, health and the environment, Flinders University, South Australia, said:

"Of the hundreds of different GM crops that have been approved for human and animal consumption somewhere in the world, few have been thoroughly safety tested. So it is not possible to have a consensus that they are all safe to eat – at least, not a consensus based on hard scientific evidence derived from experimental data."

A third signatory, Prof Elena Alvarez-Buyllla, coordinator of the Laboratory of Molecular Genetics of Plant Development and Evolution, Institute of Ecology, UNAM, Mexico, said:

“Given the scientific evidence at hand, sweeping claims that GM crops are substantially equivalent to, and as safe as, non-GM crops are not justifiable.”

“We must be especially cautious in the case of proposed release of a GM crop in the centre of genetic origin for that crop. An example is the planting of GM maize in Mexico. Mexico is the centre of genetic origin for maize. GM genes can irreversibly contaminate the numerous native varieties which form the genetic reservoir for all future breeding of maize varieties. In addition, maize is a staple food crop for the Mexican people. So GMO releases can threaten the genetic diversity on which food security depends, both within Mexico and globally.

“Such decisions with broad implications for society should not be made by a narrow group of self-selected experts, many of whom have commercial interests in GM technology, but must also involve the millions of people who will be most affected. As things stand, in Mexico we have an ongoing uncontrolled experiment with no independent scientific or popular mandate, in which GM genes are allowed to crossbreed with native maize varieties. The inevitable result will be genetic alterations with unpredictable effects.”

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Note to editors: Contrary to some media reports, most signatories to the statement are not members of ENSSER. ENSSER’s role has been to coordinate and publish the statement and to administer the collection of signatures.

References

1. http://www.ensser.org/increasing-public-information/no-scientific-consensus-on-gmo-safety/

Crop genetic engineering is dominated not by ecological experts but by molecular biologists. Many are not knowledgeable about ecological risks and – more importantly – they fail to recognize the limitations of their expertise.

Regarding the environmental risk of GM crops,
the negative effects now documented empirically have been predicted since about 25 years. For instance, while naturally occurring Bt toxins come in a diversity of variants, GM crops necessarily have to choose one Bt toxin to be transferred, significantly enhancing the probability of resistance development. Such effects are analysed by community ecology researchers and not visible on the genetic level. So it is a shame that, more than 20 years after the international academic societies of ecologists and molecular biologists (in the context of ICSU) agreed on the complementarity of their competences, and the necessity to assess ecosystem impacts in a systemic fashion, today's molecular biologists still do neither recognise nor respect the limits of their competencies (not to speak about the influence of funding). Ignoring one's own blind spots is what can turn science into a social risk.