



PRESS RELEASE

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RSE Calls for a Rational GM Debate

In light of the Scottish Government's recent decision not to permit the use of EU approved genetically modified (GM) crops in Scotland, the Royal Society of Edinburgh (RSE) has published an advice paper which it hopes will stimulate a rational debate on a complex issue around which there are deeply held opposing views.

On 17 August, the RSE joined nearly 30 learned societies and research institutions to sign an open letter urging the Scottish Government to reconsider its proposed ban. More recently, the RSE formed a working group of expert RSE fellows and RSE Young Academy members to consider the impact the proposed ban could have in Scotland. Their conclusions are reflected in the advisory paper now being published.

Recognising that GM technology is a contentious subject, the RSE is concerned that the Scottish Government announcement included emotive language likely to fuel negative public perceptions. In addition, there is disappointment that the announcement was presumptive; assuming hostile public opinion despite the latest evidence which shows that acceptability of GM foods is increasing.

The RSE is also concerned that the proposal was apparently made without expert scientific advice. This, the RSE believes, could mean that opportunities presented by GM technologies are not taken into account. Citing the example of potatoes (the 3rd largest food crop in the world), the advice paper illustrates how GM technology presents an environmentally friendly farming opportunity. If Scottish farmers had access to blight-resistant GM potato crops, they would benefit from an increased yield with the advantage of needing to use fewer applications of environmentally-damaging pesticides. This could mean cost savings being passed on to the consumer.

On an international scale, there is also great benefit to GM adoption as the challenge of producing enough food for a rapidly increasing population intensifies. These technologies, which have already been embraced in developing countries, may provide solutions to problems that arise in areas such as climate change, the availability of productive land and competing demands for natural resources such as fresh water. If Scotland fails to acknowledge these wider considerations, it may be unable to compete in a changing global market if it becomes increasingly difficult to produce the consistent quality and quantity of produce required. Produce from further afield will then become more attractive in terms of cost and reliability, resulting in loss to the Scottish economy.

Failure to adopt these technologies could also impact on the level of scientific research being carried out in Scotland and Scotland's ability to attract and retain pioneering

researchers. RSE fellow, Professor Nigel Brown commented, "Scotland is renowned for its world-class scientific research therefore it would be regrettable to stigmatise an area of exciting development which provides real scope for global benefit. The RSE recognises that the Scottish Government supports science and innovation as the bedrock of the Scottish economy and as a key basis for policy-making, therefore it would welcome the opportunity to contribute to a wider debate around the use of GM."

ENDS.

For more information contact:

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Notes to Editors

The Royal Society of Edinburgh is a leading educational charity which operates on an independent and non-party-political basis to provide public benefit throughout Scotland. Established by Royal Charter in 1783 by several key proponents of the Scottish Enlightenment, the RSE now has over 1500 Fellows from a wide range of disciplines. The work of the RSE includes awarding research funding, leading on major inquiries, informing public policy and delivering events to inspire knowledge and learning. For more information, visit www.royalsoced.org.uk/.