

Unilever's position on: Genetically modified crops

Background

Genetic modification has been widely used in agriculture for more than 20 years to make food crops more resistant to pests, more tolerant to herbicides and more resilient against diseases.

Farmers in many countries around the world, including the US, Brazil, Argentina, Canada, India, China and South Africa, now grow genetically modified (GM) crops that have been approved by local authorities.

A large proportion of some of the world's major agricultural food commodities, such as soy, maize and rapeseed are now grown as GM crops. Other crops with significant GM production are cotton and sugar beet.

Nevertheless, the use of GM technology in agriculture continues to be the subject of lively debate. Supporters of its use point to the fact that GM crops have repeatedly been declared safe for use, that they are easier to manage, more cost-effective, and often more productive, which could play an important role in feeding the planet's growing population.

Opponents express concerns about the impact of GM crop farming on biodiversity and the environment, and the leading position of a few seed companies. They also worry about the dependency of smallholder farmers on these seed companies, and their ability to compete in a global market.

Context

A number of leading scientific bodies and regulatory agencies (such as the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA), the US Department of Agriculture (USDA), the US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA) and Food Standards Australia New Zealand (FSANZ)) have concluded that from a human and environmental perspective, authorised GM crops and food ingredients produced from them are safe.

However, consumer views and acceptance differ. Concern is often higher in Europe and some parts of Asia compared to the US or Latin America, where the use of food ingredients produced from GM crops is common.

Next to that, the global regulatory environment is increasingly complex as different rules apply, not only to the authorisation of GM crops (in terms of both cultivation and their use in food products), but also to the provision of information to the consumer.

For instance, approaches to the labelling of food ingredients produced from GM crops vary greatly. It is mandatory in about 60 countries, including the European

Union, Russia, Turkey, Australia or Brazil. In the US, attempts to enact such a requirement in some states triggered a public debate about GM crops.

Unilever's position

In line with our aspiration to make sustainable living commonplace, we believe that science and technology, used in a responsible manner in agriculture, hold the potential to help meet the world's long-term food needs more sustainably.

Commitment to safety

As one of the largest consumer goods companies in the world, Unilever's priority is to provide consumers with products that are safe, meet all regulatory requirements and fulfil our high standards for quality.

Our commitment to safety and quality includes all of our food ingredients, whether produced from conventional crops or from GM crops authorised by regulatory bodies. We believe that these GM crops are as safe as their traditional counterparts and fully support regulatory control of the use of GM technology and continued scientific review in this area.

Commitment to sustainable sourcing

We have committed to sourcing 100% of our agricultural raw materials sustainably by 2020. Whether the crops we use are conventional or genetically modified, all have to conform to the Unilever Sustainable Agriculture Code, which requires our suppliers to protect farmland biodiversity and minimise chemical inputs.

We believe the use of responsibly-grown GM crops in markets where there is regulatory and consumer approval can sit alongside our sustainability ambitions.

We are also committed to improving the lives of smallholder farmers. Since 2010 we have helped more than 800,000 gain access to training and support – often including the provision of seeds – as part of our commitment to make a positive impact on the lives of 5.5 million people in our value chain by 2020.

Commitment to transparency

Unilever fundamentally supports the principle of transparency and the provision of information to consumers who want to know about the use of ingredients produced from GM crops.

In markets where there is a labelling requirement, Unilever will provide on-pack information in full compliance with the relevant legislation. In markets where there is no regulatory framework for mandatory labelling, Unilever will work with industry stakeholders to support the voluntary provision of information via websites or consumer carelines to disclose the use of ingredients produced from GM crops in food products.

Commitment to meeting consumer preferences

At the heart of our business and our brands is a deep commitment to consumers. We recognise some have a preference for foods made to specific production standards, such as processes that do not use ingredients produced from GM crops. Where feasible we offer products that meet these preferences.

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