



Rochford District Council

To the Meeting of: ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH SUB-COMMITTEE
On: 12 JANUARY 2000
Report of: HEAD OF HOUSING HEALTH AND COMMUNITY CARE
Title: GENETICALLY MODIFIED FOOD AND CROPS
Author: G P Woolhouse Report approved by

Purpose of Report

To invite Members to consider a request from Greenpeace for clarification of the Council's views on genetically modified (GM) food and crops.

Greenpeace Request

The Council has been advised by Greenpeace of the results of public opinion surveys it has carried out, and of a resolution recently passed by West Lindsey District Council in Lincolnshire, details of which are appended.

This Council has been asked to clarify its position on the following points.

- Is the Council considering taking GM foods out of local menus (Leisure Services etc)?
- Is the Council considering a Motion to declare the Authority free of GM farm-scale trials?
- Are there any initiatives aimed at marketing local produce as GM-free.
- Is the Council considering establishing the Authority as a GM-free zone?

Discussion

The Council has no established policy in respect of GM food and crops.

Members will be aware that this issue is one which is the subject of intense debate at national and international level and one in which many people hold strong personal views.

The Council has no statutory power to declare the District free of GM farm-scale trials or to declare it a GM-free zone, presumably in a similar way to which some Local Authorities have declared their areas “nuclear-free zones.”

If Council policy is established, it would be possible to seek to influence the Council's Leisure Contractors, suppliers and recipients of grant funding, to provide GM-free foodstuffs.

Officers are not aware of any specific initiatives aimed at marketing local produce as GM free. However, Members will note the concurrent report on this agenda on Farmers' Markets.

Environmental Implications

Genetic engineering (GE), also known as genetic modification (GM), involves the artificial insertion of a gene from one species into another. The technology has been in use for over 25 years but recently it has been applied to an increasing range of food crops for release into the environment. Scientists have identified the effects that some specific genes have on an organism (e.g. which gene in a plant makes it resistant to a particular insect pest). However, many other side effects occur through different genes interacting with each other. At present, these interactions are not well understood.

GM foods and human health

- Genetic modification may result in the creation of new toxins;
- Unexpected allergic reactions can be triggered (e.g. a brazil nut gene inserted into soya resulted in a reaction in people allergic to nuts);
- There are concerns that genetically modified soya may contain higher oestrogen levels;
- There is a risk of increasing the incidence of antibiotic resistance in humans;
- There has been very little research done to assess the health and safety implications to humans from ingesting genetically modified organisms;

GM crops and the environment

- Genetically modified material can be transferred to other crops and weeds but once released it is impossible to 'clean up' any unforeseen consequences. Studies have shown that pollination can occur at significant distances, threatening non-GM crops;
- Genetically modified plants which are designed to kill pests can kill beneficial insects as well. This also has a knock-on effect on birds who rely on insects in their diet;
- Plants modified for herbicide resistance will encourage increased usage of those agrochemical inputs and may have a serious effect on crop biodiversity. Herbicides kill a wide range of wild plants as well as insect, birds and other animals that depend on these plants for food and shelter;
- Genetically modified crops may have unpredictable effects on the ecological balance;

- Genetic modification to develop insect resistant crops may encourage the development of resistance in insect populations.

Financial Implications

Cannot be determined accurately at this stage.

Legal Implications

It would be reasonable for the Council to express an opinion on this issue and to seek to influence its suppliers, contractors and those in receipt of grants but it should not adopt a campaigning stance.

Parish Implications

None specifically.

Proposed that this Sub-Committee RECOMMENDS

The response to be given to the Greenpeace enquiry and any subsequent action as regards suppliers, contractors and grant recipients. (HHHCC)(720)

Background Papers

None.