

**FSA**  
**PUBLIC ATTITUDES TO GM**

DEBRIEF NOTES ON QUALITATIVE  
RESEARCH

RS

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## 1. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The objectives of this research were to:

- Establish the relative levels of concern about GM in food
- Identify the precise issues of concern in relation to GM in food
- Identify what the general public understand by the term GM
- Assess awareness of the extent to which GM technology is used in food production (and other areas)
- Establish how important it is to the general public that they are informed about the presence of GM in food or the use of GM technology
- Identify the questions that need to be answered about GM in food
- Identify who the general public would believe about GM in food

## 2. RESEARCH PROCEDURE

Six 90 minute, mixed sex, focus groups, each with eight respondents. Splits were by age, socio-economic status and area as follows:

Group 1	under 35	BC1	Hemel Hempstead
Group 2	under 35	C2DE	Derby
Group 3	35-54	BC1	Liverpool
Group 4	35-54	C2DE	Hemel Hempstead
Group 5	55-plus	BC1	Derby
Group 6	55-plus	C2DE	Liverpool

Variety of household compositions: mostly couples; group 1 no children; groups 2-4 with children; groups 5 and 6 mostly empty-nesters.

Exclusions:

- people who work in catering, cooking and preparation, distribution or sale of food; life scientists, farmers and medical professions.
- members and supporters of Greenpeace, Friends of the Earth and Soil Association.

Fieldwork March 18-19 2002. Researchers: Tim Dawson and Africa Munyama.

### 3. GM IN CONTEXT – RELATIVE SALIENCE

In normal circumstances, GM very far down the list of considerations with regard to food; is tiny feature on mental maps of food issues; does not figure at all for some.

In general issues about food GM yields salience to:

- cost/value
- taste/enjoyment
- will the kids eat it
- convenience
- goodness/nutritional value
- calorific value (fat/sugar content)
- quality
- freshness
- home shelf life
- provenance (country, organic)
- personal likes/dislikes
- personal health issues (gluten, peanuts, MSG, diabetes)

At spontaneous general level, food safety towards bottom of this list for many. Food usually assumed to be reasonably well regulated and monitored, and actual risks thought small. Dominant concerns:

- food poisoning (salmonella, e-coli).
- chemical contamination, esp from pesticides.
- occasional infection contamination such as BSE/CJD.

GM not at all prominent in spontaneous contextual chat for these groups. Even in lengthy and open-perspective discussion of food all contexts, was not mentioned at all in three groups (including both the two with young children). In the other three, the mentions were late, usually from one person only, were neutral in nature, and were not seized upon by others.

Not currently a criterion of choice or judgement with regard to purchase or consumption.

#### 4. AWARENESS AND UNDERSTANDING OF GM

Pretty limited for most people; no one at all with broad and accurate understanding. Much of information in fact sheets unfamiliar. Main strands in current understanding:

##### Awareness

- almost all claim to recognise “GM” once prompted – though apparent that some did not (notably older women, some C2DE); is seen as the most usual way of referring to the phenomenon.
- most also claimed to know that GM stands for “genetic modification” , though knowledge again probably exaggerated by group situation.
- GM known in two contexts:
  - primarily food.
  - secondarily environment in the context of GM crops.
  - no spontaneous knowledge of other roles (e.g. medicine, non-food use of crops).
  - New entity widely welcomed and thought to have several strengths:

##### Knowledge

- small minority confident about scientific basis of GM – changing genetic material to favour certain attributes.
- most see GM as more generally something to do with how crops are produced; occasional references to GM applied to animals.
- few realise that GM is technique that can be applied to all living things; also rarely appreciated that GM is continuation of long tradition of trying to influence genetic output.
- very little sense of processes and materials involved; but associations not favourable: “*chemicals*” (generally bad things) or gross intervention (“*injecting great amounts of...*”) or perhaps radiation.

##### Salience of GM as an issue

- GM widely recognised to have been a prominent issue a few years back – largely because of publicity around protests against crop trials.
- exact focus of furore unclear to many – often seen as work of extremists of some kind and attracted little sympathy from respondents.
- minority more knowledgeable about basis of protest – and some of them see some genuine reason for unease – see 5 below.
- one supermarket chain (Iceland by name to quite a few) known to have made policy of not selling GM stuff – but no influence on behaviour of current respondents and current position unknown; some saw as publicity stunt that backfired.
- GM now thought to have virtually disappeared as an issue, though scattered references to continued crop protests; assumption commonly that it has found its right level.

### **Sources of knowledge about GM**

- almost exclusively news media – and viewed with robust scepticism.
- pointedly little from government, retailers, producers, medical profession: silence taken as absence of anything to say rather than anything sinister.

## 5. FEELINGS ABOUT GM – PRECISE ISSUES OF CONCERN

Most respondents seemed not to know enough about GM (or the extent of its use –see 6 below) to have strong views. Ambivalent and suspended judgement common start points.

On the **benefits** side:

- some could see GM being used to the benefit of producer and user by
  - increasing food production – especially in the developing world.
  - making crops bigger, more resilient, better able to resist disease/drought, less dependent on pesticide.
  - improving nutritional properties.
  - increasing shelf life, consistency, appearance, taste.
  - creating new varieties (especially flowers and plants).
- others felt there must be a benefit to the producer in terms of reducing costs and raising profits but were less able to see a benefit to the end-user.
- few were aware of the benefits in other fields such as medicine or non-food production

With regard to **concerns**:

- general fear of the unknown: people often felt that this is potentially powerful technology, about which they know little and whose effects they have no way of predicting; in the absence of solid reassurance, they therefore questioned the wisdom of proceeding.
- also a fairly common assumption that the process is unnatural, unethical, and presumptuous in some way – *“mess/fiddle around with nature”, “playing God”*; grouped by some with cloning and talk of human genetic selection as controversial territory at risk from unscrupulous scientists.

- health and safety to the individual: the effects of consuming GM foods was typically the more widespread and immediate concern; people accepted that GM produce would not reach the market if it had immediate effects, but wondered how accurately the long term risks could be assessed (BSE was a potent reminder; also carcinogens). Belief underlying concern is that GM is somehow alien substance that could poison or damage.
- environmental: tended to be less prominent and widespread, but those voicing them feared they could be even more far reaching and less controllable if rogue genetic material developed and propagated in the wild. Environmentalists assumed to be anti – but no great identification with their views, and no sympathy with trashers.

With regard to GM foods in particular, a few other concerns were mentioned occasionally as possible risks – for example that:

- GM would not be as good as the natural original.
- GM might supplant the original by sheer marketing force.
- any gains would primarily be to the producer and retailer rather than the consumer.

Scattered respondents also expressed concern that the power represented by GM expertise might be abused by its exponents – for example, in questionable commercial practices in developing countries.

Worth noting that positions on GM probably not yet deep or stable – are open to change in nature and intensity under influence of public attention given to the issue. Examples occurred among respondents where passive indifference moves towards active avoidance once issue spotlighted. Would not choose GM over regular product, and may avoid GM altogether.

Also worth noting that no examples cited of GM doing harm in itself.

## 6. AWARENESS OF EXTENT OF USE OF GM

Respondents seemed to have genuinely little idea how extensively GM is used in **food production** – and guesses ranged widely though tentatively. Some specific insights:

- virtually no knowledge of the various ways GM can be used in food chain.
- virtually no knowledge of the sort of products that might see GM use at some stage.
- some assumption that GM may be used in fruit and meat production.
- no confident knowledge of pattern of use in other countries, though a few know that use in US more extensive – and seemingly free of controversy.

Similarly with regard to presence in **food on sale**. Among guesses:

- some suspect use very small if at all – argue that furore may have led to voluntary or regulatory ban.
- others guess that Iceland declaration (plus occasional sighting of “GM free”) probably means that use widespread.
- clear majority assumption is of use way above actual scale; many prepared to believe that they have been eating GM foods without realising.
- no knowledge of position on labelling.

**Non-food use** equally unknown:

- some suspect medical use – but few have imagined possibility; reality gives pause for thought and helps counter negative perceptions.
- use in cotton, washing powders etc also surprises – not seen as carrying any health threat.

Information about other uses reassures: proves versatility; helps present GM neutrally as a tool with potential for wide benefit.

## 7. IMPORTANCE OF PUBLIC INFORMATION

Current demand for information self-evidently at low level – people have not so far felt need to be better informed about the general or the specific issues.

However, range of responses once issue is raised suggest that need will arise if issue put more firmly on agenda for whatever reason – for example, increased use of GM or another blast of media attention.

Desire for information also stronger once people made aware of some of the facts about nature and use of GM with regard to food.

Key questions:

- what is GM, what does it do and how does it do it?
- what are the benefits – to the consumer, producer, retailer etc?
- what are the risks and how thoroughly have they been assessed?
- is it safe for consumption and for environment?
- how can I tell whether an item is GM or not so that I can make an informed choice?

## 8. KEY LEARNING ON INFORMATION NEEDS FROM FACT SHEETS

### What is GM

- simple explanation appeals, demystifies, rids of misconceptions about chemicals etc.
- perhaps needs a little more on role of genes as determining organisms attributes.
- might also help to point out the naturalness of the genetic material – i.e. stuff that was essentially already there, not some completely new substance.
- non-food uses, especially medical, encourage generalisation, can have halo effect.

### Is GM being used in food sold in UK?

- surprise about how little GM food on sale – raises question why, or whether use somehow disguised.
- makes people wonder why research being conducted and what might be coming up pipeline.

### GM and the food chain

- variety of uses comes as surprise..
- also surprise that so few products – goes against assumptions of many.
- acceptance in US more a positive than negative sign – but paucity of products makes people ask why so few; also why US/EU differ.
- question over why GM material removed from food ingredients, and how can consumer be sure that no trace left?
- similar question over processing aids and animal feed (NB BSE).
- benefits of GM in these contents should be mentioned.

### How do we know if GM is used in food?

- reassuring that presence of GM ingredients must be labelled.

- exceptions mostly okay – but some unease about a) idea of accidental presence and b) seeming generosity of 1% tolerance.
- but question raised of how extensive excepted products in practice.
- terminology raises question of what exactly is a GM ingredient as distinct from a ingredient made from a GM crop but containing no GM material; tiered labelling suggested

### **How safe is GM?**

- welcome for information on testing.
- safety seems a bit vague, but thrust is acceptable.
- nutrition test welcomed.
- no new allergy-causing genes: raises more questions than it answers.

### **What about the environment?**

- not very reassuring – do they do it and how can they tell?
- doubts on environmental grounds not allayed.

### **Final overviews**

Information generally reassures rather than alarms – counters some specific unease. Respondents generally glad to have it. Stances on GM more firmly based. But opportunities to put to practical effect so far limited.

## 9. TRUSTED SOURCES OF INFORMATION ON GM

Most trusted:

- leading supermarkets for food issues
- non-political government
- leading scientific specialists – as long as independence unquestionable.
- possibly heavy weight current affairs programmes.

Less trusted:

- press, especially tabloid; some defenders of broadsheets.
- producers of items in question
- politicians

FSA mostly unknown quantity, but idea of independent publicly-funded body charged with ensuring food safety sounds trustworthy.