Scottish Wildlife Trust

Policy

Genetic Modification

Policy Headline

Scottish Wildlife Trust urges the use of the precautionary principle when considering any release of genetically modified organisms into the environment. We would not support any commercial production of any GM organism or crop, unless and until there is clear evidence that there will be no significant risk of adverse impact on biodiversity.

Definitions

Genetic modification (GM) was defined by DEFRA in 2003 as 'moving genetic material from the cells of one organism to those of another, be they related or unrelated'.

Background

This position statement states Scottish Wildlife Trust's position in relation to GM crop production and wildlife. Scottish Wildlife Trust recognises that there are many other issues not covered here such as regional differences, "GM free" zones, human health and whether there is a need for the technology at all.

The Wildlife Trusts have drawn on a number of sources in formulating their position on GM, including English Nature, RSPB and ITE, and Scottish Wildlife Trust acknowledges those with thanks.

The attention of the public has been focused recently on the effect of GM technology on food. Scottish Wildlife Trust shares consumer concerns that foods produced from GM crops should be properly marked and the results of research should be made public.

However, the principal concern of the Scottish Wildlife Trust is that no one yet knows for certain whether GM technology is harmful to the environment or not. In view of the uncertainty and the potential for harm, there should be no short cuts on good science in research to satisfy pressures from government or the GM industry. Any use of GM technology in crop production should be treated with extreme caution.

Biological diversity on farmed land in Scotland has declined as a result of the intensification of agricultural methods. Although GM technology could have a beneficial effect through reduced use of chemicals, it could also cause further harm as a result of even "cleaner" (less biodiverse) cropped areas and genetic pollution of the wider environment.

Because the effects of GM technology on biodiversity have not yet been properly considered, Scottish Wildlife Trust believes independent research should be carried out to determine those effects. The results of that research should then be used to inform proposed regulatory and control regimes.

Policy Statement

SWT believes:

Commercial production of GM organisms

1. Independent, scientifically rigorous, research programmes are the only reliable and responsible means of finding answers to legitimate concerns on the effects of GM biotechnology on biodiversity and the environment.

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2. Scottish Wildlife Trust urges the Government to continue its commitment to a moratorium on commercial release of GM herbicide tolerant and insect resistant crops. In our view such a precaution is the only sensible way forward, and should help allay public fears about the commercial imperatives behind previous decisions.

3. Commercial production of GM crops should not be permitted unless and until there is clear evidence that there will be no direct or indirect significant adverse impact on biodiversity. Precautions must be taken to avoid inadvertent introductions of GM organisms for the same reasons.

Research

4. Research, which is independently conducted, controlled and monitored, should be carried out to determine the effects of GM technology on biodiversity. The results of that research, independently validated and peer tested, should then be used to inform proposed statutory controls and regulatory regimes. We welcome the fact that the Supply Chain Initiative on Modified Agricultural Crops (SCIMAC) has recognised the need for independent research.

5. However, even research has the potential to do harm, and care is needed to ensure that research programmes, especially field trials, do not in themselves damage biodiversity. Scottish Wildlife Trust believes that research should only be permitted if:

   a) laboratory tests conclude that the risk to biodiversity from a field trial is insignificant before such a field trial takes place. Pollen producing and seed setting GM plants should be treated with particular caution because buffer strips are ineffectual in containing them;

   b) there is no significant risk of an adverse impact on rural land use, including organic farming;

   c) methodology and results are made public;

   d) sufficient time is allowed to ascertain the cumulative impact on biodiversity and assess the results;

   e) likely practices by working farmers under normal farming conditions are taken into account;

   f) the research is controlled by an independent regulatory body with sufficient powers to do its job effectively;

   g) in locating field trials, account is taken of local opinion.

Liability

6. Companies promoting GM or conducting research into the effects on biodiversity should be made fully liable for any harmful consequences of their products on biodiversity.

Regulatory framework

7. There should be a regulatory structure controlling GM, including risk assessment and testing of research methods and projects. Scottish Wildlife Trust welcomes the widened remit of the Advisory Committee on Releases to the Environment (ACRE) to include wider biodiversity issues. We also applaud the Government's commitment to establish an Agriculture and Environment Biotechnology Commission. Both these steps should significantly improve and inform regulation.

Voluntary code of practice

8. Voluntary codes of practice in agriculture have had mixed success. GM technology has such potential for damage that statutory controls are essential.

Sustainability indicators

9. Scottish Wildlife Trust acknowledges and fully supports the work that has gone into Agenda 21 strategies and other similar Scottish Executive initiatives, in particular in devising sustainability indicators. The Executive should review these indicators in light of the potential effects of GM technology on biodiversity.

Cross-reference to other related SWT policies

10. This position statement should be considered in conjunction with Scottish Wildlife Trust policies on Agriculture and Organic Agriculture.

References

11. The Wildlife Trusts' Position Statement on Genetically Modified Organisms (January 2000).

Policy approved by Council: 25th June 2003

Policy to be reviewed: as required by CSC, according to policy developments.