

## CROPGEN—MAKING THE CASE FOR CROP BIOTECHNOLOGY

Vivian Moses, Chairman of CropGen, profiles this new organisation which is seeking to bring realism to the debate in the UK over GM crops



Launched in February this year, CropGen is a consumer and media information initiative whose mission is to achieve a greater measure of realism in the UK debate over GM crops. CropGen is intended as a counter-blast to the nightmare images conjured up in such phrases as 'genetic pollution' and 'Frankenstein foods'.

### The voice of science

At the heart of CropGen is a panel of scientists and others – all specialists in their fields – who recognise that crop biotechnology offers many potential environmental and consumer benefits. Benefits that have been largely missing from the current public debate. For example:

- In the USA, GM cotton uses up to 85% less insecticide than non-GM cotton. That's 85% less insecticide to pollute rivers, leave residues in the soil and affect benign insects.
- In the UK, results from GM sugar beet trials show that it can reduce total herbicide use by about 30%. As a result weeds can be left longer before they are controlled which is good for diversity because it provides a source of food and shelter for insects.

Whilst ultimately funded by the industry, CropGen is free to express its views as it sees fit. Where it sees real benefits it will say so loudly, and if it has concerns it will be just as vocal. None of the panel members is employed by any of the funding companies and the sponsors cannot veto the panel's positions on any issues or interfere with its activities.

### Science and society

The British public is very interested in science but, as pointed out in a recent report by the House of Lords' Science and Technology Select Committee, they distrust science associated with government or industry. They also have a negative view of science whose purpose is not obviously beneficial to them. Scientists are beginning to understand the impact their work has on society and public opinion but they have some way to go in communicating the potential benefits of GM technology.

As part of this communications effort, CropGen provides both media and consumer information lines, a consumer leaflet and a website (<http://www.cropgen.org>). The panel

### Panel Members of CropGen

Professor Vivian Moses, King's College, London (Chairman)  
 Professor Jim Dunwell, University of Reading  
 Professor Howard Slater, Emeritus Professor of Microbiology,  
 University of Cardiff  
 Professor Will Waites, University of Nottingham  
 Helen Millar OBE, Consumer Affairs  
 Dr Nigel Halford, Institute of Arable Crops Research (IACR), Long  
 Ashton  
 Dr Guy Poppy, IACR Rothamsted  
 Dr Peter Lutman, IACR Rothamsted

are also involved in a number of *ad hoc* activities, including responding to environmental campaigners' leaflets and letters, giving interviews to journalists, and participating in radio and television discussions. The opinions they express are based on the available scientific evidence. But in this struggle for the minds of the British public, their job is to communicate this evidence in an engaging way, a difficult task because people are as unfamiliar with the language of science as they might be with the language of economics or law. It is this language barrier that CropGen is trying to overcome – a look at our website should give you an indication of the easy-to-read style CropGen has adopted throughout its literature.

The general public people labour under the misapprehension that science deals in absolute truths but in science nothing is actually black and white. Science is about providing evidence to support as close an approximation to 'black' or 'white' as possible. Consumers hate nothing more than feeling confused so scientists need to communicate these approximations clearly, free from scientific jargon. That might seem daunting but it is not impossible.

GM's opponents see science's refusal to state anything with absolute certainty as a weakness and use it as a stick with which to beat scientists. They know that balance is as boring as men in grey suits or boffins in white coats. They know that their dramatic gestures – gas-masks, trashing sorties – will make far more interesting news than an analysis of the evidence. These media devices, however, are not arguments and do not settle anything. CropGen is attempting to put British consumers on their guard against the simplistic understanding into which they are being tempted. Many of GM's opponents feel they have nothing to prove and offer no scientific evidence as to why we should believe their interpretation of black and white. They have, of course, nothing to lose in their approach to the truth.

### *The future*

After the BSE debacle, the British public distrust official assurances about food safety. Their understandable fears have been played on both by GM opposition groups and the media. In an atmosphere in which people demand to know how technology affects them, any new development is going to have to work hard to gain public acceptance. Perhaps that's no bad thing. More open and honest debate about science and technology is long overdue. The GM debate has been opening up for some time but it has not been particularly honest. CropGen recognises that if we succumb to the current manipulation of the GM issues we risk scape-goating a technology that could – if used responsibly and managed carefully – bring real benefits to the world's people and their environment.

*Professor Vivian Moses* is Chairman of CropGen. He is Visiting Professor of Biotechnology at King's College, London; Visiting Professor of Biology and Director of The Centre for Genetic Anthropology, University College, London; and Emeritus Professor of Microbiology, Queen Mary & Westfield College, London. He has edited and co-written a number of books and articles ranging from biotechnology in healthcare and the environment to microbial oil production. Professor Moses has made a significant contribution to our understanding of biotechnology both in terms of the science itself and the workings of the industry that drives it. In addition to his expertise in science and business, he is also sensitive to the impact biotechnology has on consumers and has written a report for the European Commission on the subject.