What are we waiting for?

Europe is losing out on the massive benefits of GM because of a handful of intransigent governments, warns **Simon Barber**

Just as the European parliament's agriculture committee is debating a report entitled 'Biotechnology: prospects and challenges for agriculture in Europe', the annual ISAAA report on the global adoption of biotech crops shows double digit growth every year since they were first commercialised in 1995. In 2006, biotech crops were grown on 102 million hectares, a 13 per cent increase over 2005. Ten million of the world's farmers in 22 countries, 90 per cent of them small-scale, resource-poor farmers in developing nations, chose them for the benefits they deliver: easier management, better pest control, reduced spraying, safety for non-target species and more consistent yields that provide a more secure food supply. While developed countries led the way in the 1990s, in 2006, as in 2005, increased adoption in developing countries (seven million hectares – up 21 per cent) was greater than in developed countries (five million hectares, up nine per cent).

In Europe, there have been no cultivation approvals since 1998 despite newer, tougher legislation being in place since 2003. Inappropriate and disproportional restrictions remain on the cultivation of biotech crops and national bans deny EU farmers choice. Poorly-functioning variety registration systems, along with the inability to get permits to test crops and illegal crop destruction, have negatively impacted European research. Despite these set backs, Spain has been growing commercial GM crops since 1998 and is currently the largest producer, with around 60,000 hectares of insect-resistant maize for animal feed. France, the Czech Republic, Portugal, Germany and, for the first time, Slovakia saw a cumulative increase from 1500 to 8500 hectares from 2005 to 2006. Yet, paradoxically, because of a production deficit of protein for livestock feed in the EU, we import 20 million tonnes or more of soybean and soybean meal per annum, mostly un-segregated EU-approved GM and non-GM material from the Americas, as well as some six million tonnes of GM maize and maize gluten feed. Europe's slow adoption rate to cultivate biotech crops simply hurts EU farmers and consumers.

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GM feedstuffs are imported from China and elsewhere when they should be grown in the EU

Studies over 10 years of commercial planting of biotech crops reveal why the global farming community chooses biotechnology. In the first nine years, global net farm income increased by €23bn and the environmental footprint of farming was reduced by 14 per cent – this includes a reduction in carbon dioxide emissions in 2004 equivalent to taking nearly five million cars off the road for a year. Reduced-till agriculture – made much easier by the use of GM herbicide-tolerant crops – means healthier soil, with reduced erosion and far less carbon dioxide release. Pesticide use fell by over 170,000 tonnes, and because less spraying means fewer tractor passes, this also contributes to lower CO2 emissions. The European commission's joint research centre estimates that if 75 per cent of French rapeseed farmers grew the GM variant, they would save €24m in weeding costs per season. Similar benefits – average total savings of €33.5m a year – were calculated assuming that all sugar beet growers in the UK grew the GM herbicide resistant crop, the report estimates.

Europe has a full slate of legislation, established through the EU co-decision procedure, ensuring that only biotech crops assessed as safe and authorised for environmental release are available to its farmers. This same legislation requires GM products to be labelled so as to provide EU consumers with choice and establishes a community labelling threshold of 0.9 per cent. Yet the approval procedure remains slow with certain member states consistently voting politically against authorising biotech crops for which the EU's safety assessor, EFSA, has provided a positive assessment. Some member states also propose establishing non-science-based, unreasonable coexistence rules that would strongly dissuade farmers from choosing to grow EU approved biotech crops.

To reap the many and varied benefits offered by GM technology in agriculture, as do millions of farmers and hundreds of millions of consumers in other countries around the globe, we must have policy coherence in the EU. Although biotech research for agriculture is supported, the EU system fails to allow the marketing of safe and innovative new products and effectively condemns European farmers to watch while the rest of the world benefits. Will European leaders find the courage to accept the advice of their own scientific advisors and stop holding our farmers back? ★

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