

10 IT is not surprising that opinion is swinging against the introduction of genetically modified organisms. I don't consider myself squeamish but I cannot help feeling uncomfortable about the idea of meddling in an area that is so fundamental to life.

Logically, I do not believe there is a significant likelihood of damage to human health from GMOs. There is a risk but no greater than from the million other influences on our lives, such as electricity or alcohol. However, since there is concern, it is reasonable that any product containing GMOs should be labelled. Unfortunately, much of the world does not perceive any risk and consequently many producers, distributors and processors are reluctant to take on the extra cost of separating, for example, GM soya, from conventional soya. My concern is largely environmental. Some of the most serious "natural" disasters in the world have been a consequence of introducing new organisms into a different environment. A western population, tolerant to a range of diseases, caused havoc in the past three centuries introducing these into new areas. That sort of wholesale disaster remains unlikely; after all many of our crop plants and "native" woodland trees are exotics. However, environmental disturbance can be less dramatic but still worth avoiding. The native birdsfoot trefoil allows the Common Blue butterfly to thrive, whereas the French variety of the same species will not. GMOs are new varieties in the environment and there must be at least a risk of similar unnecessary loss. Plants also cross-pollinate. Even where a farmer decides not to grow a GMO unless the same controls are put in place that prevents cross-pollination of seed crops, contamination of conventional crops with GMO pollen is a real possibility.

30 That could be an important consideration for some markets. Worse still, if something unpredictable did occur, it may be difficult or even impossible to prevent further spread. The problem could remain forever.

With a pesticide, where the outcome is more predictable, if the unexpected occurred, it would be a simple matter to stop spraying and at the worst a small acreage or quantity of crop would be contaminated. Even nuclear waste has a finite lifetime.

These problems do not necessarily mean that production of GMOs is wrong. GMOs can offer serious benefits. I would support the case for production of antibiotics using GMOs, if they were an effi-

cient means of doing so and it saved life. Similarly, I might approve of GMOs where they led to an increase in food production. I certainly would if I were short of food. I may even support the introduction of a GMO to produce blue cotton for the production of jeans without the use of dye, if that could be shown to reduce pollution. The crux of the matter is that most of the GMOs introduced to date are trivial. Too many of the proposed introductions offer few meaningful benefits. For example, herbicide-tolerant crops, where other herbicides are already available, offer few benefits compared with the risk of damage. There is not an absolute right to approve or reject GMOs but we should be selective and only accept those offering significant benefits.³