

What farmers think about GM crops

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Farmers are upbeat about genetically modified crops, according to new research funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC).

A group at the Open University, led by Professor Andy Lane, has taken the first systematic look at what large-scale, commodity farmers – not those mainly involved in organic growing - think about genetically-modified crops. We know how consumers, governments and the food industry regard GM, but this is the first proper look at the attitudes of the people who would use GM crops.

Lane and his colleagues found that both farmers who have been involved in GM crop trials and those who have not, regard GM as a simple extension of previous plant breeding techniques, such as those which have produced today's established crop types. They regard GM crops as an innovation which they would assess on its merits. Their real interest is in how GM crops would work in practice and whether they can contribute to the profitability of their farms. The research suggests that these farmers do not think that GM raises any issues of principle, or that it is a matter of right or wrong.

Professor Lane said: "New technology such as GM is attractive to farmers. They want to produce high-quality food profitably and they want to farm in an environmentally sensitive way. GM may allow them to reconcile this conundrum by doing both of these things at once."

A particular advantage of GM is its potential to allow farmers to grow crops with high yields while using less herbicide. This involves new

management practices. Lane and his colleagues found that farmers who have been involved in the Farm-Scale Evaluations to assess GM in action have found GM crops feasible to grow.

The researchers also looked at how farmers learn about new developments such as GM. They found that most of the learning farmers do is informal, for example by experimentation or from their networks, which are made up from a wide range of people not necessarily just farmers. These networks can extend over long geographical distances.

Many farmers disapprove of past cuts in public funding for agricultural advisory services. It is now complicated and expensive for farmers to get good advice. They also feel that there is poor communication between farmers and people involved in agricultural policy, and between farmers and relevant scientific research.

Source: Economic & Social Research Council

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