



What do European Consumers Really Think about GM Foods?

Acceptance on the rise – and so is the demand for information and choice

Since GM food was first introduced in Europe in the 1990s, consumers have been portrayed as wary, sceptical, and opposed to buying these products. But is this really the case? Recent studies show time and again that consumer perception in the EU is actually much more favorable towards GM foods than is commonly depicted. European farmers know this. They are increasingly choosing not only to import GM material for feed but are also growing biotech crops where possible, because they recognize a growing market at home.

- Some 27% of Europeans indicated a positive attitude to GM food according to a 2005 Eurobarometer poll¹ – this is up from 21% in 2002.
- More and more European consumers believe that gene technology will have a positive influence on their life in the next 20 years – up from 10% in 1999 to 30% in 2005².

To buy or not to buy?

How do consumers actually behave when offered clearly labelled GM and other products side by side?

When given the possibility, European consumers actually do purchase GM foods³. Regardless of how they respond in opinion polls, most consumers do not actively avoid GM foods in the grocery stores, suggesting that they are not really concerned about GM foods.

Hungry for information...

Eurobarometer⁴ shows that 34% of Europeans believe there is insufficient information available on GM in farming. In Finland and Cyprus, this figure goes above 50%. Other polls corroborate these findings – a survey by the British Institute of Grocery Distribution⁵ showed 48% of British consumers felt they had limited knowledge of GM foods. Polls⁶ also show that the more consumers know about the benefits of GM, the more supportive they become:

- 51% of Europeans express a willingness to buy GM foods if they contain less pesticide than conventional produce.
- 49% of Europeans are willing to buy GM foods if they were produced in a more environmentally friendly way than conventional alternatives.

• In the UK, a survey by the Institute of Grocery Distribution⁷ showed 52% of British consumers consider GM a means of tackling growing global food shortages, while only 13% disagreed with this idea. 47% of respondents said GM crops would help farmers deal with increasingly extreme weather conditions and combat plant diseases, while only 12% disagreed.

... and for reassurance from Regulators

44% of Eurobarometer respondents⁸ would definitely or probably buy GM food if the relevant authorities approved it.



1 Europeans and Biotechnology in 2005: Patterns and Trends (page 19)
http://ec.europa.eu/research/press/2006/pdf/pr1906_eb_64_3_final_report-may2006_en.pdf

2 Do European Consumers buy GM foods? European Commission (14.10.08)
<http://www.kcl.ac.uk/consumerchoice>

3 Europeans and Biotechnology in 2005: Patterns and Trends (page 46)
http://ec.europa.eu/research/press/2006/pdf/pr1906_eb_64_3_final_report-may2006_en.pdf

4 Attitudes of European citizens towards the environment (page 60)
http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/ebs/ebs_295_en.pdf

5 <http://www.igd.com/index.asp?id=1&fid=1&sid=8&tid=34&cid=548>

6 Europeans and Biotechnology in 2005: Patterns and Trends (page 22)
http://ec.europa.eu/research/press/2006/pdf/pr1906_eb_64_3_final_report-may2006_en.pdf

7 <http://www.igd.com/index.asp?id=1&fid=1&sid=8&tid=34&cid=548>

8 Europeans and Biotechnology in 2005: Patterns and Trends (page 22)
http://ec.europa.eu/research/press/2006/pdf/pr1906_eb_64_3_final_report-may2006_en.pdf



GM not a major concern

Contrary to previous beliefs, GM does not appear high in a list of worries about food. A recent survey by the UK Food Standards Agency shows declining public concern over GM food. When prompted, survey results⁹ showed that respondents' concerns had fallen from around 40% in 2001 to 21% in 2009; if unprompted, only 3% of the respondents in 2008 named GM as a concern. Many more respondents¹⁰ were worried by salt (50%), fat (40%) and sugar (39%) in food products. EU

research has shown that Europeans name other concerns¹¹ as higher priorities – including climate change, water and air pollution. Interestingly, GM can play an important role in helping to address these challenges. To read more about how see the EuropaBio brochure on Green Biotechnology and Climate Change http://www.europabio.org/positions/GBE/PP_090619_Climate_Change.pdf

A case for consumer choice?

A recent EU study¹² focused on how consumers in a number of Member States actually behave with respect to GM-labelled products, not just what they said they would do in response to polls and questionnaires. The study shows:

(a) Whatever shoppers may have said in response to questions, most did not actively avoid GM products, suggesting they are not greatly concerned with the GM issue. When cross checking data of actual purchases against answers to questions about their preferences and intentions from the very same purchasers, most shoppers did not actively avoid GM-labelled-products. Responses given by consumers when prompted by polls and questionnaires about GM foods are therefore not a reliable guide to what they do when shopping in grocery stores.

(b) Focus groups in several countries studied showed that GM food is not the highest concern in people's minds when discussing food purchasing habits. Labelling was demanded by the participants, yet few of them actually looked at the labels when buying food. Most were not aware of the benefits, but responses showed that future climate and population restraints to food availability may lead to more accepting attitudes towards GM foods.

(c) An anonymous questionnaire about the purchasing behaviour of UK residents visiting North America (where GM foods and ingredients are widespread and not labelled) was

offered to the staff and students of eleven UK universities; there were over 1,500 responses. Of those responding, 91% knew the meaning of genetic modification, 3% did not and 6% said they were unsure. Asked whether they were aware that in North America many processed foods and some whole foods are GM or are derived from GM sources, and are not labelled to show that, 56% said they were aware and 44% were not. Of those who were aware, 71% did not attempt to identify GM-containing products.



⁹ Quarterly public tracker - June 2009 Food Standards Agency 24th July 2009 (page 13) <http://www.food.gov.uk/multimedia/pdfs/fsatrackersurvey.pdf>

¹⁰ Consumer Attitudes to Food Standards: Wave 8 UK Report Final (page 46) <http://www.food.gov.uk/multimedia/pdfs/cas2007ukreport.pdf>

¹¹ Attitudes of European citizens towards the environment (page 8) http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/ebs/ebs_295_en.pdf

¹² Do European Consumers buy GM foods? European Commission (14.10.08) <http://www.kcl.ac.uk/consumerchoice>

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