

GM technology pioneer's broadside

European policy and environmental groups in firing line as professor speaks out

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The founding father of GM technology has called on scientists to do more to communicate the benefits of his invention.

Professor Marc Van Montagu, who with the late Jozef Schell developed the world's first transgenic plant in 1983, used a speech in Ghent, Belgium, to also brand parts of European policy on GM an absurdity as well as criticise environmental groups for spreading misinformation.

The 76-year-old professor expressed great disappointment the full potential of GM had yet to be realised as he addressed the International Federation of Agricultural Journalists' congress. And he blamed environmentalists for forcing the technology to improve plants and crops into the hands of just a handful of multinational companies as they were now the only organisations able to afford the tens of millions of pounds needed to clear the regulatory hurdles to secure commercial planting approval.

"The regulatory burden has become enormously expensive because of the testing that has to be done. No small enterprises nor small developing countries can do this. This is one of the discussions we need to have on how we can do more with all the tools that we have."

He repeatedly accused environmentalists of holding back the technology, citing India's recent decision not to allow a GM aubergine to be grown. The stance lacked a scientific basis and was instead the result of a campaign by environmentalists against it. India's refusal would have far-reaching consequences. Many agrochemicals now banned elsewhere in the world because of their toxicity are still used on the crop in India, where children are regularly used to apply them. He said the GM aubergine offered the chance to greatly reduce agrochemical use, a move that would secure real progress for human health and the environment.

He hit out at those who persistently claim GM crops are dangerous. "There is no danger, but sadly it has not been possible to convince people of this after 25 years."

Prof Montagu said the technology offered society huge benefits and it could no longer afford to ignore these. He highlighted the benefits of using GM to develop plants that are better able to resist drought, make better use of nutrients such as nitrogen and phosphate and provide alternative higher yielding plant-based rubbers as well as oil to replace fossil fuels. All of these traits and more would be required in the years ahead as the world faces up to coping with climate change and a growing population at a time when the amount of land available to grow crops will fall.

Those better-performing GM rubber and oil plants could bring huge benefits, and

help stop the destruction of rain forests and the important wildlife, insect and plants that are in them.

Prof Montagu was in no doubt his technology was safe for people and for the environment as there had been no adverse effects since its development.

"What we need is for people to believe scientists rather than Greenpeace. I have to say to all scientists that they should no longer sit in their laboratories but instead be out talking to society about GM and its benefits.

"I am myself guilty of not doing this. It has only been in the last 10 years since I retired I have been able to do it and talk to society. It is up to us as scientists to try to find the words that convey the benefits and we will need help to do this. This industry will only work if it is accepted by society and the community at large."

Prof Montagu said Europe's zero tolerance to GM contamination in crop shipments from overseas was a nonsense. There was no such thing in science as zero tolerance as it was widely accepted there were background levels of contamination for a variety of substances, including arsenic and cyanide.

"It is totally unrealistic (this policy)," he added.

He urged changes to policy as well as calling on the commission to accept scientific evidence rather than be swayed by outside interest groups that were spreading misinformation.

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