

GM crop trial halted after crop destruction

By Richard Gray, Science Correspondent

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A trial of genetically modified potatoes that could help protect billions of pounds worth of crops from disease is to be abandoned after scientists admitted it was futile to conduct such research on crops in the UK.

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The scientists claim that sabotage by environmental protesters has made it too expensive to conduct GM crop trials in this country under the current regulations, that require the exact location of each trial to be made public.

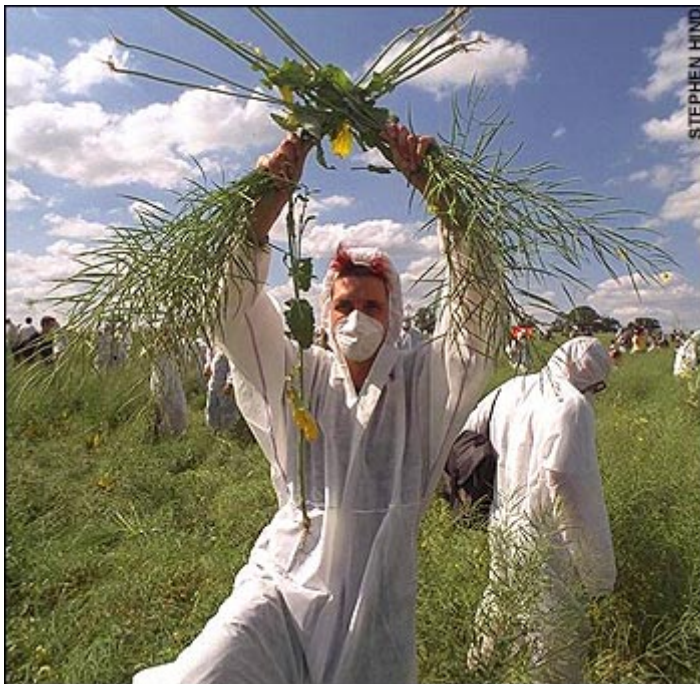
They called on the Government to allow the location of small scale trials to be kept secret or to establish a high security

facility where research on genetically modified plants could be protected from vandals.

One of only two trials on GM plants being conducted in Britain this year was destroyed last month by protesters at a field near Tadcaster, North Yorkshire, who pulled up the crop.

Scientists at Leeds University had been hoping to test the effectiveness and environmental impact of a new type of genetically modified potato that was resistant to attack from tiny cyst nematode worms.

Cyst nematodes cost the UK farming industry more than £50m a year and more than 80 per cent of potato fields in the country are affected by the pest. Worldwide, nematodes costs more than £60bn and can effect damage important crops such as bananas, which form up to 25 per cent of the diet in many African countries.



Protesters trample GM crops at Model Farm, Oxfordshire

Professor Howard Atkinson, who led the trial, said he had decided to abandon research after the destruction of the crops. He is now due to meet with Environment Minister Phil Woolas later this year to discuss ways of protecting GM trials.

He said: "Is it appropriate for universities to put up security that will cost a six figure sum to protect research from unlawful acts by zealots? We are not going to pursue the cyst nematode trials at the moment. I am not sure what the future holds for GM trials.

"I can only see two solutions. The first would be to have the Government regulate and assess trials but not publish their location or, and I think this is less likely, to have some sort of nationally secure trial field."

The cyst nematode trial, which consisted of 400 plants, cost of around £25,000. To put up security fencing and 24 hour surveillance to protect the plants from protesters would have cost at least another £100,000.

The only other GM trial currently being carried out in the UK is with potatoes that have been engineered to be resistant to potato blight which was vandalised last year in Cambridge. The remains are now protected by security fencing with 24 hour patrols.

Under existing laws, full details of every GM crop trial must be disclosed in advance on a Government website, with a six-figure grid reference identifying the precise location of the field.

Critics insist that GM crops could be harmful to the environment and almost all of the 54 GM trials conducted in the UK since 2000 have been targeted by protesters because of these fears.

GM companies and scientists now want the rules changed so that they can conduct small scale trials at secret locations so they can help to answer some of the questions that still surround the effectiveness and safety of GM crops.

Professor Wayne Powell, director of the National Institute of Agricultural Botany where the potato blight trials are being conducted, added: "The decision to release the six figure grid reference is a matter for the Government, but it is an issue that needs to be addressed. I do believe we need to be utterly transparent."