

Children are dying because of failure to use GM crops, says Owen Paterson

Genetically-modified crops will “improve human health”, Environment Secretary Owen Paterson has said, as he warned that people “thwarting” their production are putting lives at risk.

By Peter Dominiczak, and Christopher Hope

8:49AM BST 20 Jun 2013

Mr Paterson said that GM offers “wonderful opportunities” that could benefit human health and the environment.

He said GM production in the UK would mean less spraying of pesticides and less intensive farming.

Mr Paterson also said that an expansion of GM crops could lead to the creation of more nature reserves because it would allow more intensive farming, therefore freeing up “space for biodiversity, nature and wilderness”.

Mr Paterson is battling to persuade officials in the European Union to lift current rules which only allow one type of maize to be grown in the UK.

Britain is pushing for scores of GM crops to be given the green light by EU regulators, including herbicide tolerant maize and sugar beet.

Speaking to BBC Radio 4’s Today programme, Mr Paterson said that the next generation of GM foods could benefit human health.

He gave the example of “golden rice”, a strain of the food that boosts vitamin A levels and reduces blindness in developing countries.

Mr Paterson indicated that opponents of the crop could have saved 7 million lives.

“The next generation of GM offers the most wonderful opportunities to improve human health,” Mr Paterson said.

“The most shocking case that has come out is that golden rice was first created in 1999 by two

German professors.

“The World Health Organisation estimates that up to 500,000 children go irreversibly blind a year and 250,000 of those actually die.

“The problem is mainly in South-East Asia but over the last 15 years despite offering the seeds for free to those who would need them, every attempt to deploy this golden rice has been thwarted. In that time 7 million children have gone blind or died.”

Mr Paterson added: “I think all those who have thwarted the attempts to bring in this... should really reflect. Those are real young people.”

Officials believe that if current GM food restrictions were lifted it would also mean that the price of some foods will come down in the shops.

Mr Paterson will link increased use of GM crops with freeing up more land for nature reserves. This is because GM crops have a better yield and so means that a smaller area of land would need to be planted.

He will say: “Used properly GM promises effective ways to protect or increase crop yields. It can also combat the damaging effects of unpredictable weather and disease on crops.

“It has the potential to reduce fertiliser and chemical use, improve the efficiency of agricultural production and reduce post-harvest losses.

“If we use cultivated land more efficiently, we could free up space for biodiversity, nature and wilderness.”

He will refer to research from Rockefeller University which suggests that more extensive use of GM crops “combined with improved agricultural practices across the world, could release an area 2.5 times the size of France from cultivation”.

He will say GM crops are “safe and cost effective” adding: “Farmers wouldn’t grow these crops if they didn’t benefit from doing so.

“Governments wouldn’t licence these technologies if they didn’t recognise the economic, environmental and public benefits.

“Consumers wouldn’t buy these products if they didn’t think they were safe and cost effective.”

He will add: “While the rest of the world is ploughing ahead and reaping the benefits of new technologies, Europe risks being left behind.

“We cannot afford to let that happen. The use of GM could be as transformative as the original agricultural revolution was. The UK should be at the forefront of that now, as it was then.”

Mr Paterson’s expected comments were welcomed by the GM industry. Professor Maurice Moloney, Chief Executive of Rothamsted Research, said: “We are very happy to see clear leadership on this issue from Secretary of State Paterson.

“GM crops and the use of biotechnology in agriculture has been effectively on hold in Europe for many years.

“The Government’s initiative puts the UK back into a leadership position in Europe on this issue and will promote a rational approach to the adoption of technologies that our farmers want and need in order to maintain their competitive position in world agriculture.”

But critics were sceptical about Mr Paterson’s claims. Lord Melchett, Policy Director of the Soil Association, said there is no evidence any GM crops provide higher yields. He said that yields could even be lower, meaning more land is taken up.

Lord Melchett, who was arrested in 1999 when he was present at an environmental protest against a GM crop trial, also said it was worse for wildlife. He said the Government’s own five year farmscale testing in 2004 had found that GM was worse for wildlife.

He said: “It is dinner party gossip he [Paterson] is coming out with not science and not policy.”

Pete Riley of GM Freeze said it would difficult to export GM crops to our main markets in the EU as consumers on the Continent are against the technology and the EC insist it is on the label.