

Meacher's GE Albatross haunts weed seed bank trials ?

The Farm Scale Evaluation Trials (FSE) - the albatross that Michael Meacher launched over the GE sector - has marked its presence again. A new report from the Centre of Ecology and Hydrology (CEH) has confirmed that genetically modified, herbicide tolerant, cropping regimes: "significantly affected weed seed banks for at least two years after the crops were sown, potentially causing long-term effects on other taxa".

The researchers involved were not surprised by the result but it does raise significant questions about the longer-term effects of GMHT cropping on farmland biodiversity. Published in "Biology Letters", the full paper can be accessed on the CEH website and, together with their earlier reports, makes interesting reading.

As interesting, and arguably more significant though, is to recall the years before Mr. Meacher, then a Defra Minister, forced the FSE trials on his reluctant government colleagues, an arrogant GE industry and a generally scornful scientific establishment. "There is no scientific reason to suppose there will be any difference between conventional and GE cropping" was the party line - alongside industry chanting about wasting money and time and losing our competitive edge.

This inherently unscientific invocation of science to promote the GE cause and oppose dissenters has been a hugely concerning characteristic of the way the GE issue has unfolded - it has also occurred in other food and farming issues in recent years.

Thankfully, the dissenters continued to press their points, the media continued to ask questions and Michael Meacher bravely withstood departmental pressure. Consequently, as a result of the FSE trials, we now have a reasonable amount of genuine scientific evidence about the impact of GE (and non GE conventional) cropping on the farmed environment - much of which shows the earlier voices of "scientific reason" to have been hollow and mistaken.

But we don't have the same evidence about the impact of GE technology on food, diet and health. We do have the same hollow voices invoking science and the dubious concept of substantial equivalence and making the disingenuous case that there is no "scientific reason" why there should be a difference or a problem.

Nor, regrettably, do we have a Meacher equivalent.

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