

EUROPEANS REMAIN SKEPTICAL ABOUT GM CROPS

While most Europeans are in favor of medical applications of biotechnology, they are still skeptical about its uses in agricultural and food applications. These were the results of the recently published European Commission (EC) survey entitled “Europeans and Biotechnology 2002”.

This lack of support for agricultural and food applications of biotechnology in Europe, according to the survey, is seriously slowing down biotech research and development (R&D) in the European Union (EU), particularly in the private sector, and may put at risk Europe’s competitiveness in a promising sector of new technologies.

The **Eurobarometer** survey on biotechnology and the life sciences, the fifth in just over ten years, is based on a sample size of 16,500 respondents, approximately 1000 coming from each EU member state.

The survey reports that all the EU countries, with the exception of Spain and Austria, showed moderate to large declines in support for both GM crops over the period 1996-1999. Since 2000, support for biotechnology stabilized in France and Germany and increased in all the other countries with the exception of Italy, which saw a 10% decline in support.

Some of the survey’s other highlights include:

- Forty-four percent (44%) of Europeans believe that biotechnology can improve their way of life, 17% are pessimistic and 25% said they did not know. This rise in optimism holds true for all the EU member states, except with Germany and the Netherlands.
- Genetic testing for inherited diseases and cloning human cells and tissues are supported in all the member states. Xenotransplantation (use of transgenic animals to produce organs to be transplanted in human beings) is perceived to be both moderately useful and moderately risky.
- The use of genetically modified enzymes to produce environmentally friendly washing powders is well perceived and supported by the majority.
- Genetically modified (GM) crops are judged to be moderately useful and are seen as almost as risky as GM foods. Public opinion tends to support GM crops in Spain, Portugal, Ireland, Belgium, UK, Finland, Germany and the Netherlands. While France, Italy, Greece, Denmark, Austria and Luxembourg are opposed to GM crops.
- Seventy percent (70%) of Europeans trust doctors, university scientists, consumer organizations and patients’ organizations. Around 55% have confidence in private institution scientists, newspapers and magazines, environmental groups, shops, farmers and the European Commission. However, less than 50% had faith in their own government and in industry.
- There is more confidence in the European Commission in relation to regulations and their implementation with regard to biotechnology.

The full report can be downloaded at http://europa.eu.int/comm/public_opinion/archives/eb/ebs_177_en.pdf.