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Genetically modified crops and food: Precautionary Principle recommended by Bioethics Council

The ethical implications of adopting genetically modified (GM) crops and food in Ireland have been considered by the Irish Council for Bioethics in an opinion document launched today (*Genetically Modified Crops and Food: Threat or Opportunity for Ireland? Opinion*, 28th November 2005).

The Council does not view the genetic modification of plants as morally objectionable, however, if GM crops are to be introduced in Ireland, they should be implemented with caution. "Ethical considerations demand that new applications of genetics should be based on sound science with generally acceptable objectives, and progressed in a cautious but not fearful manner", said Professor Peter Whittaker, Chair of the working group and Vice-Chair of the Council.

The Irish public is especially concerned about negative health consequences and environmental damage that have been linked to the technology, concluded the working group from the results of its public consultation, which are published in the report.

The report examines the potential (beneficial and harmful) effects GM crops and food may have on consumer health, the environment, the welfare of farmers, and citizens in developing nations. The Council hopes the report will encourage constructive discussion and help inform decisions.

The Council considers that the safety assessments required by law for market approval as well as efforts made to improve GM technologies should ensure a high degree of consumer protection, and that the environmental risks can be managed if GM crops are deployed with caution.

The freedom of choice of consumers and farmers must also be protected if GM crop technology is introduced in Ireland, says the report. These rights can largely be respected by clearly labelling GM products and carefully planning where GM crops will be grown.

The Council would encourage public research programmes in GM crop development that are likely to benefit society directly. For GM crops targeted at the food or health needs of developing nations, the Council recommends publicly funded collaborative approaches involving the concerned citizens.

In 2002, the Irish Council for Bioethics established a working group on genetically modified organisms to investigate the ethical issues surrounding genetically modified organisms in the medical, industrial and agricultural arenas, with particular reference to the Irish setting. The Irish Council for Bioethics is an independent autonomous body, which considers the ethical issues raised by developments in science and medicine.

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