

**Department for
Environment,
Food
& Rural Affairs**

Nobel House
17 Smith Square
London SW1P 3JR

From the Secretary of State

Professor Malcolm Grant
Chair
GM Public Debate Steering Board
1 Victoria Street
London
SW1H 0ET

7 November 2002

Dear Malcolm,

PUBLIC DEBATE ON GENETIC MODIFICATION

I would like to thank you and the members of your GM Debate Steering Board for your work so far overseeing the public debate on GM issues. I would like to take the opportunity to reiterate the Government's support for the public debate, and our commitment to the independence of the Steering Board. We welcome the progress made so far, and look forward to the next stages of this innovative process. I welcome your proposal that the first phase of the debate will involve foundation discussion workshops with the public, to identify all the questions that the public has about genetic modification and to inform how the debate process will develop. I also welcome the Steering Board's aim to concentrate on reaching people whose views have not yet been heard in the debate.

Having seen the draft primary objective identified by the Steering Board, I would like to reiterate the Government's view that if the GM issues raised by the public range wider than just crops, such discussion should not be artificially curtailed.

The Government's ambition, at the end of this process, is to have achieved a broader and deeper understanding of what genetic modification is, how it can be used, and what the risks and the benefits are. We also want to have a clearer picture of the questions that most interest or concern the public within the UK on GM issues. The Government has made it clear that we do not want the debate to be constrained in any way, as we do not want to prejudge what is and what is not important to the public amongst the range of GM issues.

It might be helpful, finally, if I set out how Government sees the role of the debate in decision-making on the possible application of GM technology in this country. Over the coming years we will face decisions on a range of GM issues, not just crops. There are established criteria, enshrined in EU and UK legislation, which will provide a basis for the future decision making process. The starting point is that decisions are based on the scientific evidence as to whether there is a risk to human health or the environment. It is, however, important that these decisions are taken in the context of a full understanding amongst the public of their implications. The debate could be invaluable in this respect as well as in informing the government's approach to decision-making, and our view of the overall framework in which decisions are taken. We will listen, and learn, from the views emerging from the debate.

We look forward to your Steering Board's report, and will give careful consideration to this when it is delivered in June next year. I am very keen now for the debate to be kicked off as soon as possible so I am pleased that the workshops are scheduled to begin next week. I would like to express again my gratitude to you and your Steering Board for your valuable input, and look forward to the next steps.

Sincerely

Margaret

MARGARET BECKETT