

# Europe must drop ban on GM crops or get left behind, Willetts warns

**Oliver Moody**

Britain is urging the European Union to ease restrictions on genetically modified crops and other cutting-edge branches of science before the continent becomes a "museum of 20th century technology", the Science Minister has said.

David Willetts said that EU rules were holding back work in fields as diverse as medicine, agriculture and space exploration. He also voiced concern about Europe's failure to feed itself despite exporting GM technology to the third world.

Support is building in Brussels for a change of heart on GM, with Germany

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the key swing voter. Torn between a need to wean the public off food imports from outside the EU and staunch opposition from the influential Green Party, the German position is believed to be in flux before the country's general election this autumn.

Speaking after his appearance as a director at *The Times* Cheltenham Science Festival, Mr Willetts said he was trying to build consensus for an easing of restrictions on science: "By the time you've added up the French over-regulation of nanotechnology, the Brüstle judgment on stem cells [where the European Court of Justice blocked a scientist from protecting his research with a patent], the fact that there isn't a regime that would permit the use of innovative space vehicles, you're left with a great weight of regulation.

"There are just too many 21st-century technologies that Europe is just

being very slow to adopt ... one productive way forward is to have this discussion as part of a wider need for Europe to remain innovative rather than a museum of 20th century technology." His comments came the day after Chris Grayling, the Justice Secretary, criticised EU data protection reforms that could cost British businesses hundreds of millions of pounds as "mad" and uncompetitive.

At present the EU allows only one GM crop to be farmed commercially, a variety of maize engineered to resist a pest called the European corn borer. None is grown in Britain.

Mr Willetts and Owen Paterson, the Environment Secretary, are enthusiastic about work on GM crops at institutes such as Rothamsted Research in Hertfordshire but mindful of hostile public attitudes. In a survey commissioned by the British Science Association last year, only a quarter of British consumers said they were "not concerned" by the technology.

"We believe that GM crops can help make agriculture more efficient, and also just as importantly more sustainable by, for example, reducing the use of pesticides and the use of fossil fuels," Mr Willetts said.

James Watson, who shared the Nobel Prize for his co-discovery of the structure of DNA, also defended GM at the weekend: "The educated middle classes just don't like genetics, and now they don't want GM food either because they're worried about safety, but the truth is it's probably safer."

The Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council, Britain's major funding body for biotech research, also backs GM as it is worried that wheat yields have stagnated at nine or ten tonnes per hectare, and medical scientists have urged the EU to relax its rules on GM crops that can be used to harvest life-saving drugs.

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