

Peter Mandelson

EU Trade Commissioner

Biotechnology and the EU

European Biotechnology Info Day

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In this speech to the European Biotechnology Open day in Brussels EU Trade Commissioner Peter Mandelson strongly defends an open European approach to biotechnology and GM food; one that prioritises strict science-based health and safety testing but which recognises that safe biotechnology has a crucial role to play in agriculture and agricultural trade both in Europe and the developing world. Calling biotechnology "The coal face of applied science in the twenty first century" he concludes: "we must be under no illusion that Europe's interests are served by being outside a global market that is steadily working its way through the issues raised by GM food. They are not".

Mandelson argues that Europe has the appropriate risk-management systems for ensuring that biotechnology is rigorously tested, but that these systems can be badly undermined if politicians and risk-managers do not defend the science that underpins them. He says: "A rigorous system means approving GM imports when the science is on their side just as we take a firm line when precaution is justified... if politicians and risk managers undermine their own system... we devalue objective science as our most important benchmark – and that is a dangerous step to take." Mandelson warns that as a global market for GM products grows, EU application of its rules will come under greater international scrutiny. He warns: "If we fail to implement our own rules, or implement them inconsistently, we can - and probably will - be challenged.

Mandelson argues that any blanket rejection of GMOs ignores the fact that genetically modified foods have played a key part in past revolutions in agricultural productivity and will be central to providing sufficient food and feed stocks for a growing population in the developing world. They are also likely to have a central role in shaping agriculture's response to climate change through adapted bio-fuel crops.

Mandelson argues that there is an economic risk in Europe if we fall behind the global economy in approving safe biotechnology. He cites recent European Commission research that suggests that Europe may find it increasingly hard to source animal feed that is approved under EU rules – putting a heavy strain on the EU livestock sector. He says: "Isolation from international trade in agricultural biotech products that have passed credible safety standards simply may not be a viable option for the EU".

Mandelson argues that the EU should take the lead in shaping "a global system of clear rules that allow exporters and importers to trade GM crops and feed in confidence". He identifies negotiations on the Codex Alimentarius, bringing the Biosafety Clearing House of the Cartagena Protocol to full operational status and the reinforcement of the WTO SPS Agreement as key priorities.

Mandelson concludes: "One extreme of the biotech debate in agriculture often wrongly portrays it as a conflict between consumer sovereignty and corporate power - between caution and recklessness. The other extreme of the debate – especially in the United States - thinks it is a tussle between free trade and protectionism. It is none of these. Strong safety standards are legitimate principles of international law. The best defence of consumer and corporate interests is a regime that is open to new technologies but ensures they are tested in a way that keeps public safety and health paramount. And so long as we apply the same rules and standards across the board the protectionist label doesn't stick. From its side, the biotech industry needs to keep in mind that while technology determines what is possible, consumer demand determines what is economically viable. Public fears may be misplaced, but they cannot and should not be dismissed. We – and by that I mean you the industry and we, public authorities and governments – need to do a better job of setting out the issues."

Many thanks for the invitation to join you today.

The title of this conference calls biotech 'the invisible revolution'. Which is true. Yet this all but invisible technology is reshaping agriculture and industry; revolutionising medicine. Biotechnology is arguably the coal face of applied science in the twenty first century.

But biotech can arouse strong emotions. There is something in human nature that can make us afraid of science, nervous of new technologies. When those technologies affect the basic materials of life, the concerns are magnified.

But technological change has transformed the way we live immeasurably for the better. The scientific revolution taught us how to understand the natural world. Technological change has given us the capacity to shape and develop it for the public good.

My essential message today is that biotechnology is a critical part of the world's economic and environmental future. But it touches on some deeply sensitive issues – it goes right to the heart of how we feel about nature, risk and technology.

There are still those who are unnerved at the speed with which science, and the application of science through technology, changes our lives.

Biotech is at the sharpest end of that technological revolution – and evokes some of the strongest responses. Its advocates – like the advocates of many new technologies – sometimes make expansive claims. Its opponents say untested technology is being pushed on unwilling people. The atmosphere can end up so impossibly polarised that a rational public debate becomes impossible.

However, we must not allow the positive argument for biotech to be lost because public authorities and governments are sometimes afraid or unable to make the case to their citizens. That is not the leadership the public has the right to expect. As others around the world move ahead - in the United States and Japan, but also the emerging economies - we in Europe must also play a leading role in a sector that will play such an important role in tomorrow's economy.

So we need an open and rational debate about the risks and benefits of biotechnology more than ever. That debate – and the implications for trade and development - is what I would like to talk about today.

The Biotech Economy

We are already living in a biotech era – from the medicine you take to the laundry detergent you use. In the health sector, biotechnology is now an essential part of the development of new drugs and therapies. Industrial biotechnology that can replace chemical processes and the consumption of fossil fuels will be important in reducing Europe's carbon footprint. The European Union's bio-fuel strategy would not be possible without industrial biotechnology.

Most Europeans are not overly troubled by this. In fact, the most recent Eurobarometer on this subject from 2005 actually showed that most Europeans are enthusiastic about potential new applications of biotechnology.

But there is one glaring exception. Something like six in ten Europeans say they oppose Genetically Modified food. When applied to agriculture and the food we eat, biotech appears more threatening and our reaction is more ambivalent. Nevertheless, half of Europeans still say that they would be ready to buy GM food if it were healthier or more environmentally friendly. Which suggests that the

advocates of biotechnology need to do a lot more to explain what biotech is, and what its real risks and benefits are.

The role of science and risk

Like any new science, biotechnology carries risks and those risks must be probably assessed and managed. EU legislation on the approval of biotech products requires all new products to be thoroughly tested to the most rigorous scientific standards.

But no technology can ever be totally risk free. So we have developed the precautionary principle which is now incorporated in most EU policy on environmental and health protection. The precautionary principle is not about purely hypothetical hazards. It carries its own strict preconditions. First, a potentially dangerous effect must be identified and second, it must be possible to show clearly that we do not have the scientific means to judge properly the level of risk.

This process takes time, and those whose job it is to manage risk are right to be thorough. But it is also reasonable to insist that when the process has run its course, and the scientific issues have been thrashed out, we stand by the science. And that applies to both the technical experts and to the politicians they report to. A rigorous system means approving GM imports when the science is on their side just as we take a firm line when precaution is justified.

It is hard enough to communicate the outcome of complex scientific assessments to people in a simple but clear manner. If politicians and risk managers undermine their own system it becomes almost impossible. We devalue objective science as our most important benchmark – and that is a dangerous step to take.

Biotechnology and the (next) green revolution

The reason for a consistent, science-based approach to GMOs is not only a matter of good government and public trust. A rational debate on GMOs is a matter of the economic future and well-being of people around the world.

Take agriculture. The world's population is projected to reach 9 billion people by 2050. The Food and Agriculture Organisation anticipates that world food demand will double by that date, while agriculture will have to produce more energy crops and more raw materials for industry if we want to tackle climate change.

To meet this demand in a sustainable way, we will have to increase productivity in agriculture. Water resources will be put under increasing strain. Inputs like nitrogen fertilisers will become more expensive and subject to stricter rules. Forty years ago, the green revolution was about producing more with more: more fertilisers, more energy, more water. The challenge of the 21st century is to produce more with less.

We face a huge rise in demand for food and animal feed in the developing world. GM can help developing countries produce crops designed to address their specific needs – like genetically modified wheat did in India and Pakistan. It is simply not responsible or defensible calmly to refuse to assess the role of GM food in meeting those demands.

Could Europe get left behind?

Turning our own backs on safe GMOs here in Europe may carry the same risks. Europe is a major agricultural exporter and one of the largest importers of farm goods – including biotech products.

This is particularly important for the European livestock industry. Europe is heavily dependant on the import of feed products for the simple reason that we do not have the available land both to farm animals and to grow the feed they need. Reliable imports of feed are the basis of EU livestock production and its thousands of jobs.

My colleague Mariann Fischer Boel, the Agriculture Commissioner, has just conducted a study on the impact on the EU farm sector when GM crops that have been widely approved outside of Europe are then not approved in Europe. The results suggest that as the EU's major suppliers of animal foods, such as soybeans, approve new GM varieties, Europe may find it increasingly difficult to source GM-free soybeans. China's massive appetite for soybeans will also increasingly shape what is grown and sold.

Today, agricultural biotech has largely remained a US-based industry. But very soon it is likely to become a global technology. Unless we can close the gap between GMO approvals in the EU and in feed-exporting countries such as US, Argentina and Brazil we may have hungry cows and struggling farmers. Isolation from international trade in agricultural biotech products that have passed credible safety standards simply may not be a viable option for the EU, and we have to understand this reality.

The implications for trade policy

How do these questions impact on trade policy? Europe's policies on biotechnology are above all a domestic issue. We set and implement our own rules, a right respected alongside our obligations under agreements like the Cartagena protocol and the WTO SPS Agreement.

But in an increasingly open global economy, where trading partners are moving ahead with their own GM and biotech policies, Europe's policies will of course affect those who want to trade with us. We will inevitably be scrutinised closely. If we fail to implement our own rules, or implement them inconsistently, we can - and probably will - be challenged.

I believe Europe should have a positive agenda too - an interest in shaping a global system of clear rules that allow exporters and importers to trade GM crops and feed in confidence. Europe can and should play a leading role here. International negotiations on the Codex Alimentarius as an important standard setting body are one place to start. The Biosafety Clearing House of the Cartagena Protocol needs to be made fully operational to allow developing countries to make informed choices about the food products they import. Within the WTO, the SPS Agreement could become a stronger focal point for international rules on GM policy and practice.

We also need to recognise that our rules raise the bar for exporters into the European Union from developing countries, who sometimes see our safety standards as an impediment to trade or even as hidden protectionism. If we want developing countries to participate in the trade in biotechnology and to benefit from it we have to provide support to enable them to meet the requirements. By helping them fulfil our requirements, we can help them meet global standards.

Most importantly, we must be under no illusion that Europe's interests are served by being outside a global market that is steadily working its way through the issues raised by GM food. They are not.

Conclusion: the way ahead

One extreme of the biotech debate in agriculture often wrongly portrays it as a conflict between consumer sovereignty and corporate power - between caution and

recklessness. The other extreme of the debate – especially in the United States - thinks it is a tussle between free trade and protectionism.

It is none of these. Strong safety standards are legitimate principles of international law. The best defence of consumer – and corporate - interests is a regime that is open to new technologies but ensures they are tested in a way that keeps public safety and health paramount. And so long as we apply the same rules and standards across the board the protectionist label doesn't stick.

From its side, the biotech industry needs to keep in mind that while technology determines what is possible, consumer demand determines what is economically viable. Public fears may be misplaced, but they cannot and should not be dismissed. We – and by that I mean you the industry and we, public authorities and governments – need to do a better job of setting out the issues. So that people are aware of the potential benefits of GM food; and – crucially – so they have confidence in our testing and approval regime and are given appropriate information. Otherwise too many Europeans will continue to see GMOs in black and white terms, wholly good or wholly bad.

The way that human technologies affect us and the natural world has always been a flashpoint for debate. Biotechnology is no different. The only rational response is a patient assessment of the evidence and a careful explanation of the facts. Biotechnology has already improved millions of lives around the world. That alone is reason enough to ensure that we do not deny those benefits to millions more.