

... as UK press reports come under fire

[LONDON] Leading British scientists are considering approaching the Press Complaints Commission over what they claim were inaccurate media reports on the risks of genetic modification. The move follows an unprecedented campaign in the British press during the past few weeks against genetically modified food.

The campaign has led to calls for the resignation of Britain's science minister, Lord David Sainsbury, as well as the suspension of the commercial planting of genetically modified crops until the risks to human health and the environment are better understood.

But, as the momentum of the past few weeks begins to subside, it has emerged that two national newspapers, *The Daily Telegraph* and the more populist *Daily Mail*, wrongly alleged that the government was suppressing reports on the risks of genetic modification.

In addition, *The Guardian* incorrectly reported that Sainsbury owns a patent on a virus promoter used in an experiment in which rats were alleged to have suffered from eating genetically modified potatoes. Scientists are now casting doubt on these findings, which also appeared in *The Guardian*.

The scientific community often disregards inaccurate media reports on science, partly to avoid discouraging journalists from writing about the subject. But many believe that a tougher approach is now needed to ensure that future reporting is more accurate and balanced.

"I have been very depressed by what I read over the past few weeks," says Ray Baker, chief executive of the Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council. "We need to start talking to editors, and with the Press Complaints Commission."

These ideas are supported by senior officials at the Royal Society, as well as by John Beringer, professor of biological sciences at the University of Bristol and chairman of the government's Advisory Committee on Releases to the Environment (ACRE).

An ACRE report on the risks to farmland wildlife from modified crops was wrongly said to have been suppressed by the government in a front-page story in *The Daily Telegraph*. Beringer points out that ACRE reports are made public after each meeting.

Other concerned scientists include Nigel Poole, regulatory affairs manager at Zeneca Plant Science, who says he has been "stunned" by media hostility to the crops. Three years ago, he says, the press largely welcomed the development of a genetically modified tomato paste by Zeneca, cleared by the previous Conservative government. But the present Conservative opposition is one of the government's strongest critics.



Feeding frenzy: British newspapers have whipped up a storm over genetically modified crops.

Bridget Ogilvie, chair of the Committee on the Public Understanding of Science (COPUS), set up by the British Association, the Royal Institution and the Royal Society, believes that competition for readers may be one reason why Britain's national newspapers sometimes transform routine stories, even old news, into dramatic events.

For example, the *Daily Mail* last week used its front page to announce that a Royal Society report criticizing government policy on modified foods had been suppressed by the government. The society has distanced itself from the story, pointing out that the report has been in the public domain since September 1998 (see *Nature* 395, 5; 1998).

"It is very difficult to know what to do,"

says Ogilvie. "We need an informed public debate on genetic modification. But how do you do that when newspapers are not interested?"

Over the past decade, COPUS has tried to strengthen links between scientists and the press, but these efforts have focused more on developing contacts with science correspondents, rather than the more influential political writers and senior editorial staff.

Contacts have also been mostly one-way: scientists have reached out to the press, but little attempt has been made to improve the quality of science reporting, particularly in the mass-circulation 'tabloid' newspapers. These sell more than 10 million copies a day, compared with the 3 million of the more serious 'broadsheets'.

The broadsheets employ specialist science correspondents who try to inject scientific perspective into their reports. But most of the coverage has come from political and environment correspondents, some of whom are openly critical of genetic modification.

Julie Hill, programme adviser of the Green Alliance, and a member of ACRE, says that some of the news coverage reflects public concerns. But she agrees that bad journalism should not go uncontested, although she thinks it is unrealistic to expect tabloid journalists to change their ways. Ehsan Masood

Britain reassures critics on risk research

[LONDON] The British government indicated last week that there will be no commercial planting of genetically modified crops until it is satisfied that the risk they pose to human health and the environment is negligible.

Ministers insist that this has always been the government's policy, but environmentalist pressure groups are claiming that it represents a climb-down in response to the largely media-generated pressure of the past two weeks for a three-year moratorium on commercial planting while the risks are properly assessed.

The government has created a sub-panel attached to its Advisory Committee on

Releases to the Environment to assess the risks of genetically modified crops to farm management practices and wildlife.

Last October, the government and the biotechnology industry agreed a one-year delay to the commercial introduction of herbicide-tolerant crops, and a three-year delay to insect-tolerant varieties, pending the completion of farm-scale trials.

The prospect of a further delay has been criticized by both industry and the scientific community, particularly as it could lead to companies and research councils cutting funding for plant biotechnology research.

Such a development, however, could result in

additional funds becoming available for research into biotechnology for healthcare, a view shared by Ray Baker, chief executive of the Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council. "We'll have to put less money into [agricultural biotechnology] if there are no products at the end. We don't have the resources to do both."

Further delays could also boost the government's plans to promote biotechnology-based businesses, part of its support for more knowledge-based development. The Department of Trade and Industry is believed to want these businesses to focus on products in healthcare, rather than agriculture. E.M.