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# CONSUMER COMMITTEE

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Report to Board

May 6th 2003

## FSA WORK ON CONSUMER ATTITUDES TO GM FOOD

### Background

1. The Consumer Committee met on 30<sup>th</sup> April to discuss the outcomes of the activities taken forward by the Food Standards Agency to assess consumer acceptability of GM foods. Specifically, the Consumer Committee was invited to:
  - **comment** on the range of views obtained from these activities
  - **agree** what it felt were the key consumer views emerging from the work
  - **discuss** the methods adopted by the Food Standards Agency to canvas consumer attitudes on GM food, including the merit of seeking views from young people and low-income consumers
  - **advise** on the general pros and cons of using large scale quantitative surveys and more in depth small-scale qualitative techniques to assess consumer views.

### Summary

2. The Committee noted that the range of views obtained from the activities, including whether or not GM food should be available to buy in the UK, confirmed the findings of other consumer research undertaken in the UK and the EU. This confirmed that there is a range of consumer concerns about GM food.

3. It agreed that the key consumer views emerging from the Agency's work were:
  - that people thought they had insufficient information to form a view and comment effectively on the issue
  - the importance of maintaining consumer choice, including through better labelling
  - concern about the potential long-term effects on health and the environment
  - the lack of obvious benefits to consumers
  - the need for a trusted source of information about GM food
  - the importance of being able to trust in the regulatory process.
  
4. In relation to the methodology, the Committee felt strongly that it should have been consulted before the work was started, as it would have been able to offer expert as well as constructive and practical advice on the approach. It questioned why the Agency had felt the need to undertake such work separate from the main public debate and said that it would have been useful to analyse existing work on consumer attitudes to GM to identify where the gaps in understanding were, prior to initiating the programme.
  
5. It said that the information provided in the booklet and on the web-site was useful but incomplete and therefore biased, as it ignored existing concerns about GM food.
  
6. The Committee questioned the methods adopted and the use of resources. Whilst it agreed qualitative research was needed to explore consumer concerns about GM in more depth, the Committee felt that the commissioned research had not achieved this very effectively. It said that the programme lacked clear objectives and did not sufficiently analyse why people held the views they did. The Committee said that the school methods, though an interesting way to engage young people, were not consumer research. Some groups, such as people living in rural areas, Wales and the Highlands had not been addressed at all in the qualitative work. Given the limited range of involvement possible in a single citizen's jury, it was questioned whether this was the most appropriate method to have used.

7. The Committee agreed that it was desirable to engage with people on low incomes and young people but questioned what conclusions could be drawn from the Scottish work, especially considering the small numbers of low-income consumers involved. It claimed the summary was poorly written up and failed to identify which views came from the students and which came from the low-income consumers.
8. In general, the Committee said that qualitative methods were best used to identify why people thought what they did. It was noted that quantitative surveys showing apparently low or falling levels of unprompted consumer concern need to be interpreted with caution.
9. The Committee also noted the value of the independent evaluation but recommended that this should have been built into the programme from the outset.

### **Advice**

10. The Consumer Committee advised that:

#### On GM issues

- the Agency should examine how best to provide unbiased information on GM foods to the general public as part of a two-way dialogue and explore further why people have the views they have
- the Agency should take steps to respond to the concerns raised, specifically in relation to labelling
- the Agency should ensure that consumer concerns about GM foods, including carefully controlled and regulated applications of the technology and effective long-term health monitoring, are addressed through its own research programme.

#### On consultation in general

- in future, the Consumer Committee should be consulted at the outset on methods for consulting on significant or controversial issues

- consideration should be given to working with existing networks of projects, when targeting groups such as people on low incomes and young people
- as consumers do not compartmentalise their views, the Agency should work collaboratively with other government departments on consultations
- evaluation needs to be built into consultation processes from the outset.

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