

Could more cautious GMO regulation win over skeptical public in US?

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Europe's debate about GM crop cultivation isn't really over GM crops themselves, but over how nations should assess and manage risk. Despite the GM episode, evidence-based policy is alive and kicking in Europe. But good risk management involves early communication with the public and the careful weighing of many factors, not just scientific risk assessment. In general, however, industry — which usually holds most of the relevant data — favours scientific risk assessment as the be-all and end-all of regulation (see [Nature](#) **508**, 289; 2014). Environmentalists prefer the precautionary principle, which places the burden of proof on the innovator.

In the United States, the key regulatory decisions for GMOs were made in 1995, with scant public input. They were made on the basis of 'substantial equivalence', which holds that GM foods are substantially the same as their component parts.

Substantial equivalence was the original sin that undermined public confidence in GM technology, and advocates have been over-compensating for it ever since. Genetic modification is a blockbuster technology with a broad ability to mix and match genes; its use or misuse has profound implications for global ecology and the food supply. It is in no sense 'substantially equivalent' to plant breeding.

That sin may shortly be expunged. On 2 July, John Holdren, science adviser to U.S. President Barack Obama, [directed regulators](#) to revisit the US framework for regulating agricultural biotechnology. Holdren is promising simpler rules for small producers and more transparency.

Some critics still hope that GMO labelling and changes in regulation mean the beginning of the end for GM crops. More probably, it will mark the end of the beginning — if it prises out a fresh approach from the scientific community and the agricultural biotechnology industry to come clean with the public on what they're doing.

Read full, original post: [Rejection of GM crops is not a failure for science](#)