

House of Lords says UK has 'moral duty' to test disease-preventing GMO insects, enraging opponents

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Britain should challenge “woefully inadequate” European regulations and launch field trials of genetically modified insects designed to wipe out disease-carrying bugs that harm crops and people, lawmakers in the House of Lords said on December 16.

An influential committee of the parliament's upper house said GM insects, such as mosquitoes altered to be sterile or “self-limiting” diamondback moths, had powerful potential against diseases like malaria and dengue, and in controlling crop pests that cost billions in lost production.

“But the development of GM insect technologies has come to a screeching halt because the EU regulatory system is woefully inadequate,” the House of Lords Science and Technology Committee said in a report.

It said the UK government had “a moral duty” to test GM insects’ potential, and should lead public engagement with the idea as well as allowing full field trials in Britain.

One of the world’s leading companies developing GM insects is a British-based Oxford University spin-off company called Oxitec, now owned by the US biotech firm Intrexon Corp.

In what it says could be a pesticide-free and environmentally-friendly way to control insect pests, the company’s scientists have developed GM moths and mosquitoes with a “self-limiting” gene which means they only produce male offspring when they mate.

Among dengue fever-carrying mosquitoes, the GM technique cut their populations by over 90% in trials in Brazil, Panama and the Cayman Islands.

Read full, original post: [EU law ‘woefully inadequate’ for GM insects, Lords say](#)

Writing in The Guardian, two scientists, Jack Stilgoe is senior lecturer in science policy at University College London and Sarah Hartley, research fellow at the University of Nottingham, responded sharply:

[Earlier this year] the House of Lords Science and Technology Select Committee committee was looking at the potential of genetically modified insects and asking, among other questions, “Is there a role for responsible innovation approaches?” From their answer, it would appear that they think not. In choosing to swallow the promise of this technology without questioning its downsides, their report represents an unsophisticated form of moral blackmail.

The Lords have been persuaded that GM insects have the ability to save countless lives. They argue [that we have a 'moral duty' to support](#) the technology and clear out any regulation that might slow its development. . . They are motivated by the 'presence of a pioneering company based in the UK, and the world class research being conducted in our universities and institutes'. . .

We are not against GM insects. Our point is that we do not know enough. Nobody knows enough. As with any new technology, it raises new questions and creates new uncertainties. An important role for scientific institutions in these circumstances is to act as what [Harvey Brooks called 'the conscience of technology' \(pdf\)](#). We should expect experts to navigate both the opportunities and uncertainties of new technology. No new technology lives up to all of its promises, and they all bring risks. To only invest in the hope without considering the rest is far from ['responsible innovation'](#).

Read full, original post: [GM insects and moral blackmail](#)