



## A golden age for modified crops?

A new type of soybean will have critics of genetic modification tying themselves in knots

THE war over genetically modified foods is entering a new phase. At last, the GM industry has produced what it promised at the outset: a product designed to have real benefits for consumers. It's an oil from soybean modified to produce omega-3 fatty acids essential for health and proven to reduce the risk of heart disease. It can be added unobtrusively to ordinary food products, potentially bringing health benefits to millions (see page 14).

The oil contains a dietary precursor of EPA, an omega-3 fatty acid that is vital for heart health. One study calculated that in 2005, 84,000 Americans died of heart disease that might have been avoided had they had a sufficient amount of this fatty acid in their diets. That makes omega-3 deficiency the sixth most common cause of preventable death in the US.

The new crop could also relieve some pressure on the world's fish stocks. Demand for omega-3 fatty acids is rising, and at present, the principal way to obtain them is from fish.

Created by Monsanto, the soybean is a far cry from just about everything that the industry has thrown at us so far: modified crops benefiting no one but seed companies and farmers. With these, the perception – perhaps rightly – was that Monsanto and its peers were foisting a technology on us with

few benefits for consumers but unknown risks for human health and the environment.

Monsanto's oil ought to nullify that line of attack. Can Friends of the Earth and its allies justify campaigning against a product that could save lives and help reduce overfishing? Of course, they could try the argument that GM technology per se is risky, but that position looks increasingly untenable too. GM crops have been grown on a large scale for more than a decade, and by and large, the predicted environmental catastrophes haven't materialised, nor has anyone suffered health problems through eating GM food.

### 'Can environmental groups justify campaigning against a product that could save thousands of lives?'

First-generation GM crops may even have brought unexpected benefits. A recent report from UK consultancy PG Economics charting the global impact of GM crops from 1996 to 2007 found that over that period, pesticide spraying dropped by 8.8 per cent. And because fields don't have to be tilled before planting GM crops, energy savings in 2007 alone amounted to the equivalent of removing 6.3 million cars from the road. These findings are disputed by environmental groups and need to be independently confirmed, but if they hold up it will be time for the technology's critics to reconsider.

Monsanto's oil could represent a defining moment in the debate over genetic modification. Providing cheap access to a proven superfood and relieving pressure on fish stocks are worthy objectives. Only a Luddite would disagree. ■