



Pew Initiative ON Food AND Biotechnology

**For Immediate Release**

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**Pew Initiative on Food and Biotechnology Finds Public Opinion About  
Genetically Modified Foods 'Up For Grabs'**

*Pew Charitable Trusts Launch Effort To Build A New Platform For Discussion  
And Bring Needed Information To National Debate*

**Washington, DC (March 26, 2001)** – A new survey reveals that Americans know little about genetically modified (GM) foods, are uncertain about their safety, and change their views about safety when more information about widespread use of GM foods is revealed. The announcement of survey findings marks the launch of the Pew Initiative on Food and Biotechnology, a new effort committed to bringing reliable information to the national debate about agricultural biotechnology. The Initiative is a project of the University of Richmond funded by the Pew Charitable Trusts.

The survey determined that a plurality of consumers (46 percent) do not know what to think about the safety of GM foods. Those who do have a definitive opinion, however, are evenly split on the safety of GM foods, with 29 percent of respondents stating they believe GM foods are safe and 25 percent of respondents stating they believe GM foods are unsafe. Despite this uncertainty (or perhaps due to), views about safety do not seem to be strongly held. After

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hearing that more than half of the foods on supermarket shelves are genetically modified, one in five of those who initially said GM foods are unsafe changed their minds.

The survey also indicates that consumers do not know much about GM foods and want more information made available to them. Only 44% of consumers have heard either a "great deal" or "some" about either genetically modified foods or biotechnology in the production of foods. Only 9% have heard a great deal. Over half (54%) have heard "not much" or "nothing." Three-quarters of those polled (75 percent) indicated it is important for them to know whether a product contains genetically modified ingredients. Most respondents (75 percent) favor further scientific research into genetically modified foods.

"Despite the heated national debate about agricultural biotechnology, most Americans do not have strong or well-informed opinions about this new technology," said Mike Rodemeyer, executive director of the Pew Initiative on Food and Biotechnology, "Essentially, public opinion is 'up for grabs' because this new technology has moved faster than the public's ability to fully understand it and its implications."

The survey also confirmed the previously known fact that, when asked if they favor or oppose the introduction of GM foods to the U.S. food supply, the majority of respondents (58 percent) report they oppose it.

The bipartisan survey, a telephone poll of 1,001 Americans conducted in January by the Mellman Group and Public Opinion Strategies, is the first information provided to the public by the Pew Initiative on Food and Biotechnology. Recently created by a grant from The Pew Charitable Trusts to the University of Richmond, the Initiative intends to provide reliable information to the national debate about agricultural biotechnology.

In coming months, the Initiative will conduct conferences and workshops, generate papers, and disseminate information on topics related to current issues and concerns about agricultural biotechnology. Possible topics include the adequacy of the

regulatory system to address food safety and environmental concerns about the next generation of agricultural biotechnology products, the potential benefits of such products, economic impacts of the new technology and marketing issues faced by farmers and processors. The Initiative will simultaneously convene a group representing industry, the public sector, academia, farmers, and environment and consumer groups to identify actions that could help move the debate beyond the current polarized condition and towards consensus.

The Honorable Dan Glickman, former Secretary of Agriculture, and the Honorable Vin Weber, former member of Congress, have agreed to co-chair a bi-partisan Executive Advisory Committee that will oversee the Initiative's programs.

"This initiative is an important contribution to the public debate on agricultural biotechnology," said former Secretary Glickman. Mr. Weber added, "Dan and I look forward to working together with the Pew Initiative on this critical topic for our nation. "

"Agricultural biotechnology has the potential to be one of the most significant transforming technologies of our era," noted Rebecca W. Rimel, president of The Pew Charitable Trusts, "But the risks, benefits and social values ignited by its creation must be thoroughly aired if the public is to have a lasting trust in the technology and the products it produces. The Trusts have a long history of supporting projects that fill gaps in understanding. The Pew Initiative on Food and Biotechnology was created to give the public the information they need to evaluate a subject as complex and important to our public and environmental health as agricultural biotechnology."

Further information about the Pew Initiative on Food and Biotechnology and its initial survey, titled "Public Sentiment About Genetically Modified Food" is available at [www.pewagbiotech.org](http://www.pewagbiotech.org)

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The Pew Initiative on Food and Biotechnology is a non-profit project based in Washington, D.C. established through a grant by The Pew Charitable Trusts to the University of Richmond. The Initiative provides public policy recommendations, research and education about agricultural biotechnology to the public, media and

policymakers. The Initiative advocates neither for, nor against, agricultural biotechnology. Instead, the Initiative is committed to providing reliable information and encouraging debate and dialogue.