

**Brian John**

## **GM Free Wales -- the current situation**

Wales is a small country covering 20,000 sq km and with a population of just under 3 million. It is one of the four constituent parts of the UK, and because of the beauty of its landscape and the global importance of its ecology it has a remarkably high number of protected landscapes, including three National Parks, four Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty and hundreds of nature reserves, SSSIs and other designated areas. The country has a National Assembly (established in 1999) with fewer powers than the Scottish Parliament, but additional legislative powers will be taken in May, and it remains to be seen whether the Assembly will wish to take a more independent line on GM issues than other parts of the UK when the new government is in place.

There is a long tradition of radical protest and independent thought in Wales, and a degree of reluctance to obey orders from London. There is also solid opposition to GM, in all sectors of the community and the economy, and in all political parties. In 2000 the National Assembly for Wales voted unanimously against the principle of growing GM crops in Wales, and there continues to be 'all party' support for maintaining 'as restrictive a policy towards GM planting as is possible within the law'. In 2001 two farm-scale trials of GM maize were proposed for Mathry in Pembrokeshire, and that gave rise to the founding of GM Free Cymru as a grass-roots opposition movement. There was great support from the media and from the public across Wales. The landowners who offered their land for the trials were virtually ostracised by the community, and so solid and well-organized was the opposition to the trials that no contractor could be found to plant the seed in the ground. The owners had been quite unprepared for such hostility, and in spite of the backing of Aventis CropScience, the UK government and the NFU they quickly abandoned the trial.

However, GM crops have been planted in Wales in the past. There were mysterious trials of GM canola near Monmouth in 1997 and 1998, under the control of the Westminster Government. Only one farm in Wales hosted FSE trials in 2001, and it happened to lie astride the border between England and Wales, which led to some debate as to whether the planted area was actually in Wales or in England! Although the Welsh administration is deemed to be the 'Competent Authority' with respect to EU directives that relate to GM crops, there is some disappointment that it has not been prepared to diverge significantly from the Westminster line. However, in 2002 the Assembly Government took a lead in Europe by setting a legally binding distance between the production of GM maize and related non-GM crops. Then in 2004 rural affairs Minister Carwyn Jones refused to agree to the listing of GM maize Chardon LL, causing the variety to be subsequently withdrawn by the developers. And to its credit, the Assembly Government joined the GM Free Network of Regions, although it has not exactly trumpeted its membership from the rooftops! It is encouraging that Wales is taking a different line on GM liability issues from the Westminster Government, and is soon to publish separate proposals for co-existence legislation, and, given that all parties support the restrictive policy, any change in representation as a result of the May elections may not alter future strategy. The Assembly's policy towards GM is also reflected by that of our regional MEPs who recently played a full role in the blocking of the Virrankoski Report which was heavily biased towards GM interests.

The future? GM Free Cymru, FoE Cymru and other members of the GM Free Wales Alliance (including the thousands of members of the FUW and the Federation of Women's Institutes Wales) and will continue to bombard the Assembly Government, and individual AMs, with authoritative information on developments in the GM field, and we will continue to press for decisive action to block GM crops and foods from Wales. Thus far, the Assembly Government has taken a reactive rather than proactive role, and we want that changed. For a start, we want a ban on all BT varieties by name, and we also want the Assembly to replace the the corrupt GM advisory committees appointed by DEFRA with genuinely independent committees for Wales. We have many more demands, and we hope that the NGOs and the Assembly Government, working together, will give a lead which will soon block off GM crops and foods entirely from the UK.