

# Leading scientist hits out at Scots GM food ban

Former top government adviser says decision could be 'apocalyptic'

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THE Scottish Government's former chief science adviser has warned that its decision to ban genetically modified (GM) crops could have "apocalyptic" consequences for Scotland and threaten the assets it aims to protect.

Professor Muffy Calder, who stepped down from the role in December and has yet to be replaced, said she is "disappointed and angry" at the decision by ministers to opt out of European Union consents for some GM crops.

Announcing the ban earlier this week, rural affairs secretary Richard Lochhead said GM crops could "damage our clean

and green brand, thereby gambling with the future of our £14 billion food and drink sector", and may lead to a "consumer backlash".

But Prof Calder has hit out at the move, which she says does not appear to be based on scientific evidence. She also

claims the decision could be even more damaging by leaving key cash crops such as potatoes, soft fruits and barley vulnerable to diseases which "could come and wipe us out".

Prof Calder, who is vice-principal of the School of Computing and head of the College of Science & Engineering at the University of Glasgow, said: "I meant it in an apocalyptic sense.

"I'm not expert in the area, but everyone knows that there are diseases, there are blights that can affect crops.

"One of the motivations for GM crops is to develop more disease-resistant crops, and another motivation is so that you have to use less pesticide.

"If we're not looking for other ways to make our crops resistant, it does leave us open, and maybe someone else will be able to develop something."

She added: "The ban seemed to be based on a perception of demand and

CONTINUED ON PAGE 4



# 'GM ban threatens the very assets it aims to protect'

## FROM PAGE ONE

fear of consumer backlash, not on any scientific evidence about GM crops themselves. It's fear of the unknown, based on some unscrupulous articles in the very early days about potential health risks, which have really not been well founded and there has been no evidence ever since."

Asked if the decision could threaten the whisky industry, she said: "That is an implicit conclusion one could draw from it."

"To have a blanket ruling saying we can never investigate these means we're cutting off a whole lot of avenues that other countries will explore and it doesn't seem to be for scientific reasons."

She urged Scottish ministers to heed the advice of Professor Nigel Brown, a former member of the Scottish Science Advisory Council and chairman of the Genome Analysis Centre, who said there are "no examples of adverse consequences so far", and that GM crops are kinder to the environment as they require fewer pesticides.

Prof Calder has also called on the Scottish Government to publish the scientific basis for its decision as well as any studies it has done to substantiate fears of a public backlash.

"If this is based on a perception of consumer demand, where is the evidence for that? Where is the social science that has been done for that? I'm not aware of it. If you're making pol-

icy then you should indicate the basis upon which you made the policy."

She said she is not aware of any research of this nature being done while she was chief scientific adviser between March 2012 and November 2014.

Prof Calder's position echoes many others from the science and agriculture communities.

Prof Colin Campbell, director of science excellence at the James Hutton Institute for soil and crop research, insists GM

crops that have been through proper testing and approval are safe and effective.

"Banning field cultivation now will mean we cannot test current or future varieties in a Scottish context and Scottish farmers cannot use existing GM crop varieties," he said.

But anti-GM campaigners have backed the ban and accused Prof Calder of a "lack of expertise".

Soil Association policy director Peter Melchett said: "Prof Calder says 'I am not an expert in the area' and she has certainly proved this to be the case in the extraordinarily inaccurate and unscientific comments that she has made.

"The only thing that could have the 'apocalyptic' consequence which Prof Calder fears is if Scotland's image for high-quality agricultural exports is damaged by the introduction of GM crops in Scotland - that could threaten all Scottish food

and drink exports, and would have a serious impact on the Scottish economy."

## COMMENT, PAGE 26

"Inaccurate and unscientific comments"

*Soil Association's Peter Melchett*