

Europe Doesn't Care if Poor Countries Have Food or Money



By Alex Berezow — July 16, 2016



[1] Credit: Etsy

Despite the common notion among Americans that Europe is a progressive, technologically advanced utopia, the reality is that the continent -- when it comes to matters of science -- is rather backward. (ACSH President Hank Campbell and I [said that](#) [2] long before it was cool to say that.) Now, a very harsh report in the most recent issue of *Trends in Biotechnology* underscores the infuriating extent of the problem.

The article, authored by a team of Canadian researchers led by Stuart Smyth of the University of Saskatchewan, declares that the European Union has essentially ignored the United Nations' plea to increase global food production 70% by 2050. How so? By overwhelmingly rejecting biotechnology.

Currently, 19 of the 28 nations (soon to be 27, thanks to Brexit) have banned farmers from growing GMOs. As *NewScientist* [indicates](#) [3], this will have little practical effect within the confines of Europe since it was hardly growing any GMOs in the first place*. The usual suspects, like Greenpeace and Friends of the Earth, have successfully scared the EU's citizens and bureaucrats.

However, from a global standpoint, Europe's decision is very bad. The UN says that crop yields need to increase by 2% each year just to keep pace with population growth. The world is falling woefully short. (See chart. Note that average annual yield increases for corn, wheat, and rice have all fallen below 2%. In some regions, yields are actually shrinking.)

Table I. Average yield growth rates for selected crops (% per year)^{iv}

	Crop					
	Maize		Wheat		Rice	
Time period	1961–1989	1990–2006	1961–1989	1990–2006	1961–1989	1990–2006
Global average	2.21	1.59	2.78	0.55	2.19	0.97
Developing world	2.53	1.92	3.76	1.43	2.34	1.01
Developed world	2.50	1.67	2.41	-0.13	0.77	0.73
Western Europe	3.65	1.74	3.25	0.86	0.33	0.53
Eastern Europe	2.62	2.45	3.29	-1.27	-0.61	3.63
North America	2.20	1.43	1.58	0.19	1.87	1.35

Credit: Smyth et al, *Trends Biotechnol*, 2016.

Obviously, all tools -- not just biotechnological innovations but also sustainable agricultural practices -- should be at the world's disposal. But Europe's decision to turn its nose up at GMOs affects everybody. Farmers in poor countries, who make some of their money by exporting crops to Europe, could certainly benefit from the [proven yield increases and profits that GMOs allow](#) [4]. However, the EU can (and does) reject shipments if even a trace of unapproved GMOs is detected, so many farmers essentially have no choice in the matter. To keep European bureaucrats happy, these poor farmers accept less advanced technology and lower profits.

The European fear and obsession over GMOs is truly pathological. EU regulations allow higher levels of real contaminants (such as insects, sticks, and manure) in their food than GMOs. In the words of the authors, "science-based regulation seems to have taken a back seat in the EU."

Of course, what does the EU care? For the most part, Europe is wealthy and well fed, and its native population is shrinking due to a [low fertility rate](#) [5]. So, as Europe continues its [genteel decline](#) [6], it can still afford the luxury of organic food grown in the Garden of Aphrodite and fertilized with unicorn droppings.

Despite the authors' concluding entreaty that the "EU cannot abrogate its duty to use its wealth and resources on behalf of humanity," Europeans will likely carry on in the tradition of Marie Antoinette, simply looking the other way when faced with global poverty and food shortages.

Let them eat (organic) cake.

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*The Europeans' principled opposition to GMOs isn't even all that principled. As Mark Lynas [points out](#) [7] in the *New York Times*, Europe imports more than 30 million tons of animal feed, most of which is genetically modified. Most countries also allow the import of some GMOs for human consumption, but the [rules are arbitrary and unscientific](#) [8].

[Source](#) [9]: Stuart J. Smyth, Peter W.B. Phillips, William A. Kerr. "EU Failing FAO Challenge to Improve Global Food Security." *Trends Biotechnol* 34 (7): 521-523. July 2016. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.tibtech.2016.04.003> [10]

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- [1] <https://www.etsy.com/?ref=lgo>
- [2] <https://www.amazon.com/Science-Left-Behind-Feel-Good-Anti-Scientific/dp/161039321X/>
- [3] <https://www.newscientist.com/article/dn28283-more-than-half-of-european-union-votes-to-ban-growing-gm-crops/>
- [4] <http://journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0111629>
- [5] http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Fertility_statistics
- [6] <http://www.economist.com/node/15065405>
- [7] http://www.nytimes.com/2015/10/25/opinion/sunday/with-gmo-policies-europe-turns-against-science.html?_r=1
- [8] <http://www.nature.com/nbt/journal/v34/n7/full/nbt.3588.html>
- [9] [http://www.cell.com/trends/biotechnology/fulltext/S0167-7799\(16\)30007-5](http://www.cell.com/trends/biotechnology/fulltext/S0167-7799(16)30007-5)
- [10] <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.tibtech.2016.04.003>