

GM debate fury after FSA blasts 'anti-science' culture

▶▶ Watchdog warns of data 'undermining'

▶▶ Ex-Farm Minister's vociferous support

By William Surman

THE row over genetically modified food has taken another dramatic turn after the Government's food safety watchdog said there was an 'anti-science' culture permeating through the media and public life.

Lord Rooker, ex-Farm Minister and current chairman of the Food Standards Agency (FSA), further warned this culture was feeding into Britain's schools.

The outspoken peer said science was 'the cornerstone' of the FSA's work on food safety.

But he intimated that work, which crucially includes investigating the potential of introduc-

ing GM food into British diets, was being undermined by 'anti-science' groups.

His comments came in a letter to Peter Melchett, policy director at the Soil Association, the country's leading organic and anti-GM lobby group.

Lord Rooker told Lord Melchett it was his 'personal view' that 'there remains an anti-science and technology culture in the media and public life, which permeates our education system and into the schools', whereas the FSA was 'pro-science'.

"It is a basic principle of this agency that our work is founded on evidence, including the best available science. Science is indeed the cornerstone of our work on food safety," he said.

Lord Rooker's letter was in response to one from the Soil Association, which accused the agency of 'favouring' GM technology and inserting text from

GM companies into key Governmental reports.

The Soil Association is pushing Government Ministers to abandon plans for the FSA to run a national debate on GM, fearing it would be biased.

But rather than favouring GM, Lord Rooker said it was part of the agency's remit to educate the public about GM food and to listen to their views.

Specialist unit

"This is demonstrated by the fact the agency has established a specialist social science unit that works alongside our policy teams, and a Scientific Advisory Committee focusing on the social sciences, both of which help us to develop the evidence base."

Lord Rooker also rejected claims from the anti-GM lobby that the FSA only listened to pro-GM business when compiling a 2009 GM food and feed report.

"The agency was absolutely

even-handed in its dealings with stakeholders - from all viewpoints," said Lord Rooker.

"The draft report the biotech industry commented on was the same as the Soil Association and other stakeholders saw - at the same time - in November 2008.

"By comparing that draft report against the final published version, you will see a great many changes were made to the draft and these changes reflect comments made by the whole range of stakeholders," he added.

Government Ministers are considering whether to continue a national debate on GM, which would cost £500,000 and be run by the FSA.

£½m

If Government decides to allow the continuation of the GM debate, it will cost £500,000.