# Is there a place for GM crops in a sustainable future? (Part 2)

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Author and journalist Mark Lynas and researcher and writer Claire Robinson go head-to-head.

# Mark

**If** GM crops are so ineffective, **wh**y are millions of farmers in 29 countries (the majority in the developing world) using them across 160 million hectares of agricultural land?

**Your arguments are grounded in** the ideological battles of 15 years ago, when I was on your side. But the world has moved on, and forced me to change my mind. There is clear evidence from a multitude of sources now **pointing to** the benefits of GM crops where they have been adopted. A recent EU/Food and Agriculture Organization joint expert workshop **was crystal clear on this** (Lusser et al, 2012). For example, Bt cotton in India is now 90 per cent of the entire crop and ‘strongly reduces insecticide use and increases yields’.

For you, this all seems to be about corporations and patents. I hope you don’t use a mobile phone, or any other modern technology whose intellectual property is protected by a patent and manufactured by a transnational corporation. Actually, an ‘open-source’ approach is perhaps more applicable to GM than many other modern technologies; and for the record, Rothamsted has made clear that its aphid-resistant wheat (if it works) will remain patent-free.

Your casual dismissal of the yield issue **is particularly troubling**. Yields **are critical** **for** food security, particularly in a subsistence farming context. Why deny poor farmers the best that modern technology can offer?

**I’ll leave you with a quote from** Norman Borlaug, who won the Nobel Peace Prize for saving billions from starvation with his Green Revolution: ‘If the naysayers do manage to stop agricultural biotechnology, they might actually precipitate the famines and the crisis of global biodiversity they have been predicting for nearly 40 years.’ Be warned.

# Claire

GM crops are only grown on around three per cent of farmland by 2.8 per cent of farmers. GM is confined to a few commodity crops: soy, maize, canola and cotton, most of which are used for animal feed in intensive feedlots, biofuels and fibre. That’s after 30 years of GM technology and billions of dollars in R&D funds.

**In contrast,** conventional breeding outperforms GM on producing crops with valuable traits like high yield, disease resistance, and drought tolerance (‘GMO Myths & Truths’, 2012). And the UN says agro-ecological farming has delivered yield increases of 80 per cent in poor countries.

Meanwhile, GM technology **is in meltdown**.

In the US, rootworms are eating GM insecticidal maize, and herbicide-resistant superweeds are choking GM herbicide-tolerant crops. In Argentina, GM soy producers have been convicted of polluting a neighbourhood with agrochemicals, resulting in high rates of birth defects and cancers.

**The picture you paint of** Bt cotton in India **has been rejected by** a Parliamentary Committee which, **after examining evidence and talking to** farmers, **published a scathing report** on the crop’s impact and demanded an end to GM crop trials. Studies claiming benefits from Bt cotton have been criticized for being based on unverifiable industry data.

Farmer adoption of GM seeds in some countries has been forced by consolidation in the seed industry. GM seed companies have withdrawn less profitable non-GM seeds from the market in North and South America and India.

Criticism of GM crops isn’t based on ideology but on harsh facts.

# *Now answer the questions for Part 2*