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BCA Position Paper on Coffee and Genetic Modification July 2017

INTRODUCTION

All living things contain cells. Each cell contains thousands of different genes, which in turn determine the characteristics of human beings, plants, and animals.

Genetic modification is the name given to the technique of changing the genetic make-up of an individual organism by inserting, removing, or altering individual genes to achieve a chosen result. Genetic modification, also referred to as biotechnology, is nothing new and, indeed, has been used for many years. Gardeners and nurserymen have for years been breeding plants/flowers to produce better blooms or new strains.

Modern biotechnology, where a specific gene is deliberately transferred to another organism, is relatively new and has resulted in crops, including soya, maize and potato, being modified to make the plants resistant to certain weed-killers, thus making weed control easier for the farmer, and to make the plants more resilient to insects.

COFFEE AND GENETIC MODIFICATION

There are currently no coffee products on the market that have been produced from genetically modified coffee beans, because at this time no such bean exists.

The British Coffee Association is however aware of limited, independent research in this area being carried out in one or two research centres. Information made available concerning this research indicates that attempts are being made to remove a specific gene from the coffee plant which will result in a speeding up of the ripening process, or removal of the naturally occurring caffeine from the plant. This research is at an extremely early developmental stage and any such development will not be commercially viable for many years to come.

LEGISLATION

In the UK & Europe, as in the US, all new foods produced using genetic modification must undergo a rigorous scientific evaluation and stringent regulatory approvals process to assess their safety in use. To our knowledge, there are currently no applications to approve any genetically modified coffees.

In the event of such a product becoming available, if a food contains genetically modified ingredients, this must be shown on the label. Any intentional use of genetically modified ingredients at any level has to be labelled and therefore consumers have the choice as to whether they purchase or not.

SUMMARY

Although technically possible there are currently no coffee products on the market that have been produced from genetically modified coffee beans, nor are there any close to being brought onto the market in the foreseeable future.

Below please find a section 'Questions and Answers' that may answer questions that are raised. These are intended for your information only and not for distribution to external audiences.

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Q: What are GMOs?

A: GMOs are genetically modified organisms that have had their genetic structure modified in a well-defined targeted way.

The introduction of a GMO for food use, a food containing or consisting of GMOs and food produced from or containing ingredients produced from GMOs is only allowed on the EU market after a stringent authorisation procedure. At this time, EU approval has only been given for a few products, notably specific types of GM maize and soya.

Q: Are coffee beans genetically modified?

A: Current research into the genetic material of coffee has either not gone beyond the laboratory stage (identification of the gene responsible for caffeine-formation in the plant) or paves the way for traditional plant-improvement methods. The identification of the Robusta genome in Brazil was completed in 2014 and the successful sequencing of the Arabica genome in California announced in January 2017.

No request for GM coffee on the EU market has been received, let alone approved. This means that all coffee legally entering the EU market is GM-free.

Q: Does the BCA support the production of GM coffee?

A: It would not be appropriate for the BCA to speculate at this time. There are no genetically modified coffee beans currently available.