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## Will Genetically Modified Crops End Food Crisis?

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The global food crisis is leading countries to rethink their bans on genetically modified seed, hoping the new products will increase crop yields.

By [Bill Bishop](#)

**GM foods have been protested around the world. This Greenpeace demonstration was in Thailand after a government official said he might lift a ban on genetically modified food.**



The director of the World Food Program said in London earlier this week that there is a "silent tsunami" of rising food prices in the world that is driving more people into poverty and causing food shortages that have set off riots around the globe, the [Washington Post reported](#).

"This is the new face of hunger -- the millions of people who were not in the urgent hunger category six months ago but now are," Josette Sheeran, executive director of the World Food Program (WFP), said at a London news conference. "The world's misery index is rising." British Prime Minister Gordon Brown said that 25,000 people a day are dying from conditions that are linked to hunger.

The worldwide food shortage — and the rising cost of food — is leading those who were reluctant to use or plant genetically modified crops to change their minds, according to a [front page story in The New York Times](#). "Soaring food prices and global grain shortages are bringing pressures on governments, food companies and consumers to relax their longstanding resistance to genetically engineered crops," reports Times reporter Andrew Pollack.

**Food protests, like this one in Mexico, have erupted around the world.**

Photo: [biocrime](#)

There is pressure on countries that ban genetically modified (GMO) goods to drop their restrictions to imports of crops



grown from these seeds. And Pollack reports that some believe GMO seeds are one way farmers could increase yields and stem the food shortages. The Minister of Science and Technology in Nigeria "has called on African leaders to promote genetically modified crops to tame hunger on the continent," [reports AllAfrica.com](#).

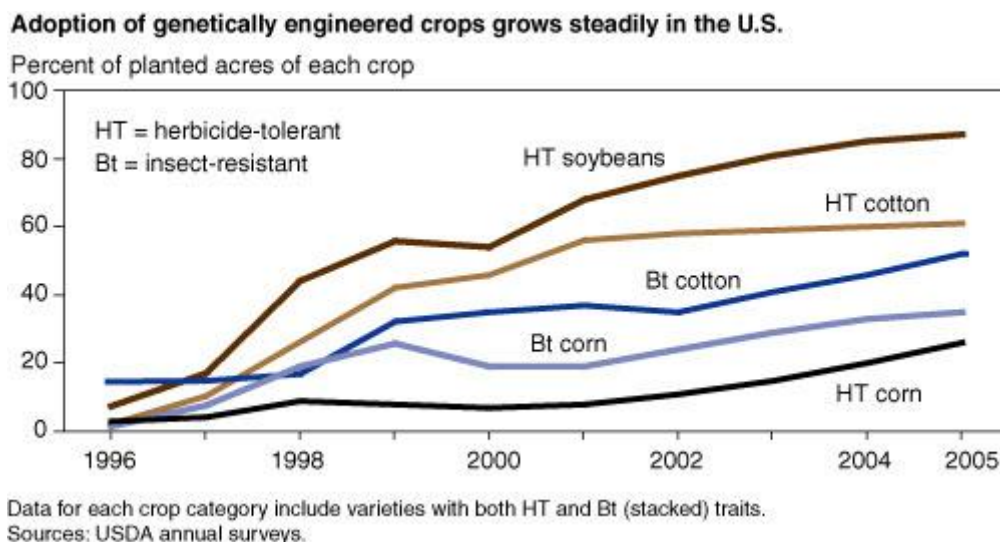
Britain's Gordon Brown said the use of genetically modified crops to be reconsidered for the sake of resolving food shortages. "We must take the initiative to further develop higher-yielding and climate resilient varieties of crop," [Brown wrote](#) in a recent letter to world leaders.

The push to plant more GMO seeds skips over a question that is far from answered, however: Do genetically modified seeds really increase crop yields?

"Genetic modification actually cuts the productivity of crops, an authoritative new study shows, undermining repeated claims that a switch to the controversial technology is needed to solve the growing world food crisis," [reports Geoffrey Lean in The Independent](#). "The study – carried out over the past three years at the University of Kansas in the US grain belt – has found that GM soya produces about 10 per cent less food than its conventional equivalent, contradicting assertions by advocates of the technology that it increases yields."

Lean is referring to the work of Barney Gordon, a University of Kansas agronomist. Gordon had heard farmers complain about low yields of soybeans. So he planted a genetically modified (GM) seed and a conventional seed. At harvest, the conventional seed produced 77 bushels an acre while the seed modified to work with the Roundup herbicide produce 70 bushels.

The Soil Association, an organic farmers group in the United Kingdom, [issued a report in mid-April](#) that summarizes several studies on the low productivity of GM seeds. The acceptance of GM seeds and crops has been caught up in the swirl of world politics, as environmental groups generally oppose the expansion of these products.



The research on the productivity of GM crops is mixed, however. Farmers in the Midwest report that GM corn doesn't yield more per acre than normal hybrids. The U.S. Department of Agriculture, meanwhile, [issued a report on GM crops](#) that generally found that GM seeds did increase yields for some crops.

There is general agreement, though, that GM crops are not the solution to the world food crisis. The New York Times reported that "a new international assessment of the future of agriculture, released last Tuesday, gave such tepid support to the role genetic engineering could play in easing hunger that biotechnology industry representatives withdrew from the project in protest. The report was a collaboration of more than 60 governments, with participation from companies and nonprofit groups, under the auspices of the World Bank and the United Nations."

The [leader of the project said](#) farmers in Africa could increase their yields more with increased use of fertilizer and better irrigation than with GM seeds.