

SIR

The decision of the Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs, Food & Environment, Richard Lochhead, MSP, to ban genetically modified (GM) crops in Scotland is clearly a blow to the economic competitiveness of our farmers – an irony in itself as the cabinet secretary uses export economics as justification.

However, I would argue that greater damage is done to Scotland's scientific standing in the world.

The phrasing of the Government's press release clearly insinuates that GM crops are dirty and harmful to the general public. If that is the case, then this is clearly a more appropriate matter for the Cabinet Secretaries for Education & Lifelong Learning (a brief that also includes Science) and Health, Wellbeing & Sport. There should have been a consultation process that not only rigorously examined the health issues of GM, but took into consideration the global reality that climate change and population increases will inevitably necessitate GM crops to prevent mass starvation. In this context, there is an inexcusable cognitive dissonance that we may have a Scottish government promoting a parochial GM-free agricultural policy, while contributing to worldwide famine relief, and allowing our population to be fed on imported GM food and clothed in cotton 90% of which is currently of GM origin.

A clear scientific case set out by clinicians and public health experts led to the brave, unilateral Scottish alcohol minimum pricing legislation that will have far-reaching health and societal benefits. Contrast that example with the current statement where nebulous market research and niche opinion are paraded to justify a policy aimed at increasing alcohol export to the world. The Cabinet Secretary uses the rather banal justification that "...There is no evidence of significant demand for GM products by Scottish consumers...". Public opinion on complex technical issues has to be guided by scientists and politicians working in cooperation, and requires a certain amount of backbone – the examples of Tamiflu stockpiling, MMR vaccination and drug policy are sobering instances where this has not been the case. Let's not add GM crops to this list.

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