

PUBLIC OPINION RESEARCH INTO BIOTECHNOLOGY ISSUES

SECOND WAVE

**Presented to the Biotechnology Assistant Deputy
Minister Coordinating Committee (BACC),
Government of Canada**

Executive Summary

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Prepared for the Biotechnology Assistant Deputy Minister Coordinating Committee, Government of Canada, by Pollara Research and Earncliffe Research and Communications.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

SECTION	PAGE NUMBER
A. INTRODUCTION	4
B. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	6

A. INTRODUCTION

Pollara Research and Earnscliffe Research and Communications are pleased to present this report on a public opinion research program conducted in late January and early February 2000 for the Biotechnology Assistant Deputy Minister Coordinating Committee, Government of Canada. The research was comprised of two separate instruments: a telephone survey and a set of focus groups. This report presents the findings of both.

The research was designed to establish whether there had been significant changes in public opinion towards biotechnology since the previous research phase in the fall of 1999.

Using some elements from the benchmark survey questionnaire from the fall of 1999, Earnscliffe designed and conducted a national telephone survey of 1000 people between January 31 and February 4, 2000. That was followed up with focus groups in the third week of February, using much of the focus group agenda from the fall as well.

The research probed four areas of investigation in order to track current opinion on biotechnology and compare the results with the fall survey. The areas included:

- overall awareness and familiarity;
- perceived risks, benefits and drawbacks;
- assessments of government performance in biotechnology, preferred roles for government and future priorities; and
- the acceptability of various products and processes.

The final results report on the views of a random sample of 1000 Canadians and carry a margin of error for the national sample of +/- 3.0%, nineteen times out of twenty. Margins of error for sub-samples range up to +/- 3.9% for smaller regional samples. Precise margins of error can be provided for the variety of aggregated sub-samples.

Three nights of focus groups (six groups in all) were conducted in Montreal, Toronto and Vancouver between February 9, and February 10, 2000. The research followed a consistent agenda for discussion and was designed to probe in more detail opinion underlying the results of the telephone survey. Each night of the focus group wave comprised a group of approximately ten participants drawn from the general population and a group of similar size of *Involved Canadians*, our proprietary population segmentation of Canadians who are significantly more interested and involved in public policy issues.

This report is divided into two main sections: results of the survey, followed by a summary of the learnings from the focus groups.

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B. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Overall the survey indicates that awareness of biotechnology is growing, though that is having no real impact on self-reported familiarity and interest. As a result, the depth of knowledge of the field remains relatively low. Nevertheless, growing awareness is translating into increased levels of concern on all fronts, particularly health. It also appears to be fuelling somewhat more interest in the ideas of more regulation and more research into the impacts of biotech applications. Federal government performance ratings are consistent with these growing concerns, eroding somewhat on all indicators. However, the generalized presumption among Canadians that their food is safe appears to be relatively insulated from these trends.

The message from this updated survey is a bit mixed. On the one hand, these results do not signal a major absolute shift in opinion despite months of intense media coverage and debate. Most Canadians remain disengaged and disinterested and there has been no galvanizing or catalytic event to change that.

On the other hand, the public opinion numbers continue to move in a consistent direction, towards higher overall concern. Though the movement is *comparatively* small, it is quite marked given the relatively short space of time between surveys. Significantly as well, the movement is larger among *Involved Canadians*, that 30% segment of the population that Earnscliffe has identified as more activist in its behaviour and more influential than other cohorts. If the current pace and direction of change continues, the result over time might be an undermining of confidence in the biotechnology sector and in the federal government's ability to address the issues that biotech raises.

The highlights of the findings include:

Awareness of biotechnology-related issues has risen substantially. There has been a 15% increase in the number of Canadians who say they have heard something about biotech in the past three months, now 53%.

Familiarity and interest in biotech have not grown significantly. The number of those who say they are very or somewhat familiar with biotechnology has grown by three percentage points since October, though only 6% are very familiar now. Interest levels – quite low -- are unchanged since October.

There has been a downward trend in the assessment of benefits vs. drawbacks, especially in health and food.

Since October, 13% fewer people believe that there are major or modest benefits to health from biotechnology. The number is almost precisely the same (12%) when it comes to benefits in the quality of food, while those perceiving drawbacks in those areas have gone up 8% and 9%, respectively.

Assessments of federal government performance are down slightly in all areas. While there is no change in *excellent* and *good* overall performance ratings, they still hover under 20%. However, *poor* overall performance ratings have risen from 26% to 29%, with *health* performance down five percentage points (22% say good or excellent) and *ensuring interests of Canadians taken into account* down 4% (14% say good or excellent).

The desired priority list for government remains largely unchanged from October. Health, environment, the ethical use of biotech and informing Canadians are the main issues, while economic benefits are waning as a priority.

Health remains the most effective benefits case for communications messaging. The same percentage as last time see it as the strongest argument (36%). Biotechnology's potential to help solve world hunger is the second strongest argument (29%), increasing by 4% since October.

Long-term risk is by far the most effective negative argument. In fact, 5% more see it as the strongest negative argument (now 44%).

Experts and science remain the preferred decision-making drivers. There was no change in how most people wanted decisions made: they continue to believe that experts should be more influential than members of the public and they want science to trump ethics when the two come into conflict.

- 59% would rather rely on experts over the public
- Two-thirds would rather rely on science over ethics

The demand for regulation and caution is growing. For instance, 7% more *disagree* with the proposition that “government should encourage biotech although there may be unknown risks” (37% now disagree.) Other results in this area include:

- A 4% increase in agreement with the idea of “government regulating biotech more than other sectors” (73% now agree)
- A 4% increase in agreement with the idea of “conducting further research into long-term health and environmental impacts before allowing any further use of biotech” (87% now agree)
- A 5% increase in agreement with the idea of “slowing use of biotechnology until more is known” (72% now agree)
- 10% more *disagree* with the idea that “enough is known about safety of products made through biotechnology to allow them to be used” (54% now disagree)

The presumption of the safety of food remains insulated from growing concerns overall. Though within the margin of error, there has been a 2% increase in the assumption that food on store shelves is safe (now 71%), with a similar increase of 4% in the assumption that food has been tested for safety by government (now 77%.) At the very least, given the margin of error, there has been no substantial deterioration in this assessment despite the intensified debate about GM foods.

The focus groups were consistent with the telephone survey. Participants were somewhat more aware of biotechnology and its applications than they had been in the fall but were no more engaged, interested or knowledgeable. Consistent with previous focus group findings, few are prepared to fully endorse or fully oppose biotechnology writ large. Instead, most Canadians make distinctions between biotech applications that are acceptable and not acceptable. Health and medical applications are consistently met with positive sentiment. GM food applications continue to be met with resistance by most, although this resistance has yet to catalyze determined behaviour to oppose the production of these foods or to avoid eating them. The safety of food continues to be an issue most people separate from their concerns about GM food, as most Canadians believe the food they purchase is safe and is tested for safety. In addition, these results indicate that few have any sense of what the federal government is doing in this field and confidence is eroding about the federal government’s ability to address key issues (particularly in terms of health and environmental risks) that biotech raises.

A final word about the demand for information about biotechnology. Though the survey did not ask the full battery of questions posed in October, it did probe respondents' views about the role of government in providing information. An overwhelming number of people wanted government to provide them with information and then let them decide for themselves whether to use biotechnology products. In focus groups, most people advocated an "informed choice" approach to GM foods, leading them to support some form of labelling. Many said they would accept a voluntary process but indicated they would expect a mandatory solution if the voluntary process did not produce results.