

Study of GM potato a must, debate hold

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It would be “very remiss” of Teagasc if it did not research genetically modified (GM) potatoes as these potatoes could be available to Irish farmers in five or 10 years, Teagasc scientist Dr Ewen Mullins told an An Taisce GM debate in Dublin on Saturday.

He is leading the GM potato study in Oakpark, Co Carlow, which is looking at the impact of the blight-resistant potatoes on the soil.

Dr Mullins said chemical company BASF has launched an application for the commercialisation of its blight-resistant potato in Europe.

“So if that’s approved, it’s approved for all EU farms,” he said. Irish farmers would be free to grow GM potatoes and research has found that 60 per cent of potato growers would plant blight-resistant potatoes if they were available.

Dr Mullins said farmers sprayed the average potato crop 20 times during its lifetime to keep blight at bay and this was not sustainable.

Teagasc planted 24 GM potato plants and 24 non-GM plants in August. It is examining the impact of the potatoes on soil health to see if it affects organisms such as bacteria, fungi and worms.

Six weeks after planting, blight appeared on the non-GM potato plants while the GM line was not affected.

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