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## **Canadians suspicious of biotech foods despite lack of harm evidence**

BY DENNIS BUECKERT

OTTAWA (CP) - The vast majority of Canadians remain deeply suspicious of biotech food even though they have been consuming it for years with no evidence of adverse health effects.

Roughly 90 per cent of people surveyed for Health Canada last year said they were concerned about the long-term risks of GM (genetically modified) food products. "Almost all Canadians (92 per cent) indicate some level of concern with the long-term risks these products might cause for human health," says a commentary by Pollara Inc., the public opinion research firm that did the survey.

Yet Health Canada has not received a single report of harm from more than 40 GM products approved in recent years, including canola, soybeans, corn, rice and sunflowers.

"There is no evidence showing that any of them have triggered any adverse health effects," William Yan, a scientist with the department, said in an interview Wednesday.

The Pollara study was based on interviews with a random sample of 1,430 Canadians in March 2004.

The main health concern is that proteins created by genetic modification could contain allergens but GM products are carefully screened for allergenicity, said Yan.

The biggest biotech crops in Canada are canola, corn and soybeans. It is estimated that 70 per cent of the food on supermarket shelves may contain GM ingredients.

Worldwide biotech crop value reached \$44 billion last year. Canada is one of the top five producing countries, with \$2 billion worth of commercial biotech crops in 2003-04.

"This is the largest clinical trial ever in the world and there have been no negative outcomes," said Greg Penner, a molecular biologist with NeoVentures Technology of Guelph, a biotech company.

He blamed Media sensationalism for fuelling anxiety: "It sells more papers if you scare people rather than educate them," he said.

But Peter Andree, an expert at Trent University in Peterborough, Ont., said people have good reason for caution.

"I would argue that there are still a lot of holes in our understanding of the full effects of genetically modified organisms," said Andree, who co-authored a recent report on biotech regulation for the Ottawa-based Polaris Institute.

Andree said concerns are not solely about human health but also about environmental impact, in particular the risk that genes from GM crops will contaminate other plants. That could result in herbicide-resistant weeds, for example.

He said the federal government has been slow to respond to recommendations from a study of biotechnology it commissioned from the Royal Society of Canada several years ago.

That report recommended an assessment process for GM animals, a moratorium on GM fish approvals, mandatory labelling of GM food and a national science program to study the effects of GM organisms.

The government has rejected mandatory labelling, preferring to try to work out an elaborate voluntary program. It is working on a process to assess GM fish.