

Is Charles' anti-GM outburst linked to India business plans?

Prince Charles, who was Thursday slammed by scientists for an outburst against genetically modified (GM) food and the Indian Green Revolution, has major plans to market his organic food products in India.

Two months ago, the chief executive of the Prince's Duchy Originals line of organic products announced plans to launch the brand in India and the US as part of a five-year strategy to quadruple annual turnover from 50 million pounds to 200 million pounds (\$93-373 million).

Andrew Baker said the company hoped to establish a presence in India by the end of the year.

'We've also taken steps to establish a Duchy presence in India linked to the Prince's Bhumi Vardaan Foundation, established to help the poorer farmers of the Punjab,' Baker said.

'Our intention is to establish Duchy India as a commercial vehicle for the organic produce of farms supported by the foundation,' he added.

Charles, in an interview published Wednesday, said India's Green Revolution 'worked for a short time but now the price is being paid'.

'I have been to the Punjab where you have seen the disasters that have taken place as a result of the over-demand on irrigation because of the hybrid seeds and grains that have been produced which demand huge amounts of water.

'The water table has disappeared. They have huge problems with water level, with pesticide problems, and complications are now coming home to roost,' Charles said.

The comments by Charles, who is an anti-GM campaigner, highlight his often-uneasy relationship with multinational supermarket chains and came a day after Britain's largest retailer, Tesco, announced a 60 million pound investment plan in the Indian retail sector.

Last year, Sainsbury's - another large British supermarket chain whose owner is a GM enthusiast - dropped Charles' organic farm as a supplier of carrots, saying his vegetables did not meet the supermarket's standards.

Meanwhile, scientists and politicians Thursday rounded on the heir to the British throne, saying his remarks were ill-informed, bewildering and unhelpful.

Julian Little, chairman of the Agricultural Biotechnology Council, an industry group, linked the Prince's views to his interest in organic farming.

'The Prince is an organic farmer and it's in his interest that organic farming works,' he said. 'There are millions of other farmers whose role is producing high-quality, affordable food, and they need all the tools that are available, of which GM is one.'

Phil Willis, chairman of Britain's all-party parliamentary science committee, said scientific farming had helped feed billions of people.

'His lack of scientific understanding and his willingness to condemn millions of people to starvation in areas like sub-Saharan Africa is absolutely bewildering,' he said.

'The reality is that without the development of science in farming, we would not be able to feed a tenth of the world population, which will exceed nine billion by 2050,' Willis added.

Alison Smith, professor of Plant Biochemistry at the John Innes Centre in Norwich, Britain's leading plant science institute, criticised what she called the Prince's 'ill-informed, one-sided and generally negative' remarks.

'He seems to be ranting about GM crops, urbanisation, globalisation and even hybrid plants. He is inflating fears instead of contributing to reasoned debate.'

However, a spokesman for the international NGO Friends of the Earth supported Charles, said: 'Prince Charles has hit the nail on the head about the damaging false solution that GM crops present. GM crops will not solve the food crisis - and forging ahead with an industrialised farming system will continue to fail people and the environment around the world.'

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