The science behind genetically modified foods and extreme views

New CU Boulder research shows that when it comes to genetically modified foods people who hold the most extreme views opposing these foods also think they know most about genetically modified food science, but actually they know the least.

Phil Fernbach is the study’s lead author and is a professor of marketing at CU Boulder's Leeds School of Business.

CUT 1 “What we find is that people who are opposed to genetically modified foods think that they understand the technology in a lot of detail, but in fact do not know very much about genetics or about science.” (:14)

Published today in Nature Human Behaviour, the paper is a collaboration between researchers at CU Boulder, Washington University in St. Louis, the University of Toronto and the University of Pennsylvania.

Fernbach says marketing and psychology researchers asked more than 2,000 U.S. and European adults for their opinions about genetically modified foods.

CUT 2 “We ran a series of surveys where we measured people's attitudes about genetically modified foods, whether they opposed them or whether they're in favor of them. We also asked them a battery of Science and genetics literacy questions. So questions that gauge the extent to which they actually understand the science.” (:21)

Despite a scientific consensus that genetically modified foods are safe for human consumption and have the potential to provide significant benefits, many people oppose their use. More than 90 percent of study respondents reported some level of opposition to GM foods.

CUT 2 “The more extreme that people are, the less they actually know. Which makes some sense, because there's a scientific consensus around the safety of genetically modified foods. So, it's very possible that people who are more knowledgeable about the science learn about the scientific consensus and therefore have lower opposition.” (:18)

The paper’s authors also explored other issues, like gene therapy and climate change denial. They found the same results for gene therapy the pattern did not emerge for climate change denial. The researchers hypothesize that the climate change debate has become so politically polarized that people’s attitudes depend more on which group they affiliate with than how much they know about the issue.