EU hostility to GM crops costs the lives of millions of the world’s poor, former Environment Secretary Owen Paterson warns

Former Environment Secretary Owen Paterson will today accuse the European Union and Greenpeace of condemning millions of people in developing countries to starvation and death by their stubborn refusal to accept the benefits of genetically modified crops and other potentially life-saving advances in plant sciences.

In his fiercest denunciation yet of the so-called “Green Blob” of bureaucrats and militant environmental pressure groups, Mr Paterson will liken them to the Luddites who smashed machinery in the 19th Century and accuse the EU of “neocolonialism at its worst” through its policies of restricting food production within its own borders as well as in impoverished regions of Africa.

Speaking on a visit to South Africa, Mr Paterson will declare that the world stands on the brink of a second Green Revolution of the kind that saved a billion people from mass starvation in the 1960s and 1970s.

But the prospect of such a breakthrough is being held back by privileged Westerners in positions of power and influence intent on imposing their food “fetishes” on farmers struggling to scrape a living in the Third World and on their more affluent counterparts at home.

The former minister will argue that the stakes are so high that the spectacular recent advances in plant sciences cannot and should not be denied widespread application.

He will also point to “good news about biotech” highlighting the expansion of GM crops in the USA and South Africa and the approval given to field trials of disease and drought resistant crops in a raft of Middle Eastern and African countries, such as Egypt, Nigeria and Uganda.

But he will also accuse the Green Blob of “myth-making and misinformation” even where farmers have voted for GM technology and the benefits have been established.

After visiting farmers in Free State engaged in growing GM maize, Mr Paterson will say in a speech to farmers, scientists and businessmen at the Agri SA auditorium, Pretoria:

"This is a time of extraordinary opportunity for Africa. Progress in the plant sciences
is opening up the promise of a second Green Revolution, one that can not only feed the 9 to 10 billion people that will inhabit our planet in 2050, but feed them well – one that can finally end the shame of the nearly one billion who still go to bed every night hungry and malnourished.

"This is also a time, however, of great mischief, in which many individuals and even governments are turning their backs on progress…Not since the original Luddites smashed cotton mill machinery in early 19th century England, have we seen such an organised, fanatical antagonism to progress and science. These enemies of the Green Revolution call themselves “progressive,” but their agenda could hardly be more backward-looking and regressive.

"They call themselves humanitarians and environmentalists. But their policies would condemn billions to hunger, poverty and underdevelopment. And their insistence on mandating primitive, inefficient farming techniques would decimate the earth’s remaining wild spaces, devastate species and biodiversity, and leave our natural ecology poorer as a result.

"I call them the “Green Blob” – a reference to a 1950s Sci-Fi movie starring Steve McQueen in which a blob-like alien attacks Earth and swallows everything in its path: the environmental pressure groups, renewable energy companies and some public officials who keep each other well supplied with lavish funds, scare stories and green tape. This tangled triangle of unelected busybodies claims to have the interest of the planet and the countryside at heart, but it is increasingly clear that it is focusing on the wrong issues and doing real harm while profiting handsomely.

"The Blob operates on two levels. First, by a pernicious grab for funding dollars with literally hundreds of them orbiting the honey pot of Europe. Secondly, with an ideological belief that Europe should abdicate its fundamental responsibility to feed its own people.

"Neo-colonialism at its worst, Europe sits on some of the most fertile land on the planet, and yet imports food from the rest of the world, which requires the equivalent of 35m hectares of farmland to produce."

"There are many impediments standing between the vision of agricultural progress and Africa, of course, but none is more pernicious than the Blob. It is supported by massive funding provided by the EU itself, as well as numerous church and humanitarian groups, and the well-meaning but misguided generosity of the privileged classes in Europe and elsewhere. It has undue influence in the media, government and international institutions. Unfortunately, few question either its credentials or motives.”

Mr Paterson will point to the battle over the “miracle grain” of vitamin-A enhanced Golden Rice as an example of the vicious campaign mounted by Greenpeace to hold back scientific advances in agriculture. This has included the destruction of crops grown in field trials in the Philippines and similar attacks on GM wheat in Australia and elsewhere.

Yet vitamin-A deficiency is a major cause of blindness and death among children in
poor countries, accounting for two million young lives every year.

Mr Paterson will say: "So let’s be clear. Although these deaths are preventable, 6,000 children alive today will be dead tomorrow. (By comparison ebola has tragically killed about 9,000 in the last year: about 25 a day.)

"Many of those millions of lives could have been saved if Golden Rice had been available in their diet, and it could have been already for several years, but for the on-going opposition of well-financed anti-GM activist groups and their ceaseless campaign to frighten people and pressure governments to keep Golden Rice off the market.

"The leader of that opposition, with a combined global war chest estimated to exceed US $500 million, has been Greenpeace, with its combination of highly sophisticated PR and un-scientific scaremongering…

"So I say to my friends in Europe and in the United States: next time some young volunteer stops you on the street to ask for money for Greenpeace, ask them about Golden Rice. They’ll want to talk about all the polar bears and whales they claim to have saved, but ask them instead about the millions of children that their organisation is helping condemn to blindness and early death."

The former Environment Secretary will also turn his guns on the EU for its “retreat” from science, its insistence on the innovation-denying precautionary principle, and its pandering to the Green Lobby. He will accuse it of scrapping the role of EU science adviser, held by Professor Anne Glover, a supporter of GM crops, after a Greenpeace-led campaign against her.

He will charge the EU with “strong-arming” African nations not to grow GM crops and threatening to cut off imports if they refuse.

Mr Paterson will say: "Of course, the greatest offender of all is the European Union itself, which in a twisted version of neo-colonialism has imposed its affluent organic affectations and anti-scientific policies on Africa."

"Today, nearly 805 million people do not have enough to eat, about one out of every nine people in the world. The majority of them are children, who will never have the same chance at a good life as others because hunger will stunt their development, shrink their innocent capacity for hope, and leave their small bodies prey to any number of terrible illnesses.

"One in three children in many developing nations today has been stunted by hunger. Sixty-six million attend school classes hungry every day. Poor nutrition causes nearly half of all the deaths of children less than five years of age – over 3 million children every year.

"This is the state of affairs that the EU’s precautionary principle would effectively preserve."

Mr Paterson will urge a revolt against the backward-looking, destructive policies of
the EU and their Green allies.

"Too many of our fellow human beings are already eating less. I don’t believe that we, as Europeans, can really say that we belong to a humane society, a decent society, until every single one of them has access to good, nutritious food. Until every human being on this planet has enough to eat.

"That means that somehow we have to get right again with science. We need every possible tool available to meet this challenge. We simply cannot afford to take the most promising plant technologies off the table and keep them locked away in the regulatory drawer while children continue to go hungry…

"We stand today at the beginning of a second Green Revolution – a period of extraordinary breakthroughs that can do the job if we let them.

"We must let them. Despite the flack. Despite the propaganda. Despite the political setbacks we sometimes encounter. We must all push forward.

"Myth versus fact; Green Blob versus Green Revolution: There is literally no challenge today that is more important.”

ENDS

EDITOR’S NOTES:
Rt Hon Owen Paterson MP will be delivering his speech “Green Blob versus Green Revolution” on Tuesday 24 February 2015 at 8am GMT, to the Annual South African agricultural biotechnology industry/ISAAA media conference in Pretoria, South Africa.

UK 2020 is an independent, centre-right think tank established by Rt Hon Owen Paterson MP in October 2014 to research optimistic, robust, common sense policies for the UK.

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