

# Thin Ice



the GM Freeze Campaign newsletter

Issue 35, December 2014

## EU 'opt outs' vote brings good news but still plenty of trouble ahead

In November, emails announced an anti-GM "win" in the European Union, following a vote that strengthened the proposed power of individual EU countries to ban GM crops. That vote by the Environment, Public Health and Food Safety Committee (ENVI) on 11 November 2014 did go as well as we could have hoped, but the situation is complicated and the battle far from won.

To understand our concerns the first thing to consider is the motivation behind this proposal. Several GM crops have, in recent years, been judged "safe" by the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA) but still failed to gain approval for planting in the EU because too many member states just don't want them. National bans are now being considered in order to reduce resistance, giving anti-GM countries a 'get out clause' in exchange for backing off and allowing GM crops to be approved for cultivation in those countries with pro-GM Governments, like the UK.

Beyond our concern for what national opt-outs could lead to at home, GM Freeze produced a briefing in June 2014 on the potential impact of cross-border contamination, [www.gmfreeze.org/contamination\\_matters](http://www.gmfreeze.org/contamination_matters). Speaking at the time, Director Liz O'Neill said that "pollen and seed don't respect national boundaries any more than they give way on a roundabout and experience shows that once the GM genie is out there we cannot put it back in the bottle".

The process of creating legislation in the EU is something of a merry dance. First, the Environment Council (member state environment ministers) agreed a text in June which gave us a great deal to worry about. Countries wishing to ban a GM crop were required to first



negotiate with the GM company. The legal status of bans was questionable. Only a very narrow range of reasons could be given for instituting a ban – we could go on.

Between June and November, a large number of amendments were proposed by all sides. Intense lobbying went on in the few days between the publication of all of those amendments and the

**This process is far from over. MEPs will need to hold very firm to retain all the amendments.**

actual vote, including emails from GM Freeze members and supporters living in the EU constituencies of MEPs who sit on ENVI. We must have got something right because the vote on 11 November agreed a number of significant improvements. These include a much stronger legal basis for bans, no role for GM companies in the process of achieving a national ban, the specific inclusion of environmental grounds as a

valid reason for a ban and a requirement for countries growing GM crops to put in place effective measures to protect non-GM crops from contamination, especially in border areas.

These are significant and welcome improvements but we still face the very real possibility that this proposal will lead to GM crops being approved for planting in the UK in the near future. Even more worrying is the fact that this process is far from over. EU legislation is created by achieving a level of consensus between MEPs (in this case the ENVI committee), member states (the Environment Council) and the European Commission. Negotiations are now going on to reach a compromise between those three bodies and neither the Environment Council nor the Commission has a history of being on "our side". MEPs will need to hold very firm if they want to retain all the amendments agreed by ENVI.

A plenary vote (by all MEPs) is planned for January 2015 and we will let members and supporters know how and when you can help by telling your MEPs how you feel about this issue. The way things work in Brussels means that we can often only give you a meaningful brief very close to a particular vote. We are aware of how difficult this can make it for many people to get involved but unfortunately important amendments and other details are often decided very late in the day. Please make sure we have your up to date email address and, if you are able to act when we get in touch, please do so on behalf of yourself but also others who may not be in a position to respond.

To make sure your details are correct on our database, please email [info@gmfreeze.org](mailto:info@gmfreeze.org) or call us on 0845 217 8992.

# M&S leaves a bad taste in the mouth



## Eagle-eyed customers helped break the news in November that Marks and Spencer is selling six genetically modified products in its food halls.

The UK's strict labelling laws, which require GM ingredients to be listed as such, have helped consumers to say no, making GM products a rare site on our supermarket shelves. However, an increasing number have been creeping in over recent months. There is some GM cooking oil on sale, but the growing trend is for highly processed foods imported from North America, with a tell-tale sticker "translating" the ingredients list and nutritional information panel to comply with UK law. Many seem designed to appeal to children, who are not known for reading labels before they start pestering parents for the latest sweet treat!

The infamous Lucky Charms cereal (featuring an 'adverse effect on activity and attention in children' rating as well as GM ingredients) has been joined in Tesco by a range of Hershey's confectionery, Twinkies and others. But the three Ton Ton sauces (Hibachi, Teriyaki and Ginger) which have appeared in M&S alongside three varieties of Moravian Cookie grabbed the headlines because they so clearly contravene the trusted retailer's widely-promoted Plan A.

M&S trade heavily on their reputation for good quality food and Plan A commits them to working "with our customers and our suppliers to

combat climate change, reduce waste, use sustainable raw materials, trade ethically, and help our customers to lead healthier lifestyles". In contrast to such laudable aims, the farming regimes that have produced the GM ingredients in these products have been implicated in a number of environmental problems, including the devastation of the iconic monarch butterfly, the development of superweeds and the blanket spraying of powerful pesticides over huge swathes of land. They also disempower small farmers by handing over control of food production to big agrochemical companies.

Speaking to the Daily Mail, GM Freeze Director Liz O'Neill said that people felt let down. "However trendy it is to sell imported foods, UK consumers don't want GM in their food and they have been contacting us to express their concern. The GM maize and soya in these products is designed to withstand a pesticide regime that has been implicated in the 90% decline of monarch butterfly populations and a range of other environmental, social and ethical concerns. People expect to be able to trust their favourite retailers, who wouldn't put these ingredients in their own brand products."

We asked supporters to let M&S know how you feel. The company's standard reply focused on the fact that these are not M&S branded products, as if that makes everything okay. We are now helping people to explain in a little more detail why it's simply not good

## GET ACTIVE

If you see a product with GM ingredients when you are out shopping, please let us know by emailing [info@gmfreeze.org](mailto:info@gmfreeze.org) with the following information:

- the name of the product
- the GM ingredient(s) concerned
- the name and address of the shop where you found it
- the date you saw the item for sale
- a photograph of the label stating the GM content if possible
- what the store manager had to say in response to any complaint you made.

We will add the details to our webpage [www.gmfreeze.org/spotted](http://www.gmfreeze.org/spotted) where you can see the list of GM products spotted to date and also follow links to contact information for the main UK retailers.

enough, asking: *if these products are not ethical enough for the M&S brand, why are you allowing them into your UK stores?*

If you didn't receive an email from us about the products in M&S and would like to go on the list for similar updates, please send your email address to [pippa@gmfreeze.org](mailto:pippa@gmfreeze.org).

These recent developments highlight the power of labelling at a time when American citizens are campaigning hard in a number of states to get GM ingredients listed on the label. GMWatch is following all the developments and you can read the latest news at [bit.ly/11oIFGF](http://bit.ly/11oIFGF).

You can also subscribe to the GMWatch daily news feed to keep up with events around the world at [bit.ly/1qkMKGW](http://bit.ly/1qkMKGW).

**"We want to make everything that is alive on the planet. Everything that is alive is not optimal. It can be made better. We want to make totally new organisms that have never existed and replace every existing organism with a better one. It just seems obvious that eventually every human will be designed on a computer."**

*Austen Heinz, CEO of Cambrian Genomics discussing his modest plans for the application of synthetic biology*

# Throwing precaution to the wind?

**The UK Parliament's Science and Technology Select Committee is holding an inquiry with the catchy title 'GM Foods and Application of the Precautionary Principle in Europe' and GM Freeze has been playing a role.**

The precautionary principle is enshrined in certain parts of European Union (EU) law to protect through the prevention of avoidable harm. There are a number of highly academic definitions but in ordinary words it means that if something might cause harm, but the risk of it actually doing so cannot be accurately worked out, those who want to do it must prove it to be safe before they can continue. What it means in relation to GM is that companies wishing to have GM crops approved for planting in the EU are required to submit evidence of the safety of their crops to the European Food Safety Authority.

The terms of reference for the select committee inquiry focus heavily on the economic potential of GM crops and seem to assume that the precautionary principle has been incorrectly applied by the European Union (EU). The questions posed to parties wishing to submit evidence caused so much concern that a number of academics wrote to the committee complaining of bias. However,

GM Freeze decided to take part because it is so important that somebody makes the evidence-based case against GM in these official forums.

You can read GM Freeze's written evidence on our website [www.gmfreeze.org/ppinquiry](http://www.gmfreeze.org/ppinquiry) and see how it compares with others by viewing the whole body of evidence submitted on the inquiry's own webpage [bit.ly/1wNUT39](http://bit.ly/1wNUT39). Director Liz O'Neill also appeared in person before the committee on 15 October 2014, alongside Doug Parr (Chief Scientist and Policy Director, Greenpeace UK), Professor Ottoline Leyser (Director of the Sainsbury Laboratory at the University of Cambridge but appearing as a representative of the Royal Society) and Professor David Baulcombe (Royal Society Research Professor and Regius Professor of Botany at the University of Cambridge). You can view the evidence session online at [bit.ly/1rZGr8F](http://bit.ly/1rZGr8F) and judge for yourself how balanced the MPs' approach was to the different witnesses.

The main points that Liz aimed to get across were:

- Single trait solutions (ie adding a particular gene) cannot solve systemic problems. This is particularly important when those promoting GM pull out

examples like Golden Rice – even if it worked on its own terms, those eating it would still be missing other vital nutrients and the underlying causes of malnutrition would remain.

- It is vitally important to separate consideration of the theoretical potential for genetic modifications to achieve a particular outcome (eg crops that can grow in salty water) from issues around the crops that are currently awaiting approval by the EU. All of the latter are designed to support the kind of pest-management regimes that were found to be harmful to wildlife in the UK Farm Scale Evaluations and which are now implicated in a wide range of environmental problems in countries growing GM crops.

- There is a significant opportunity cost in focusing so heavily on GM. "Cinderella" disciplines like soil science and agroecology are crying out for investment that is currently dominated by GM.

- Genetic resources are a public good and should not be controlled by any individual, group or organisation.

We do not know when the inquiry report will be published but it is likely to be between January and March and we will put a link on our website.

## New GM campaigns

**Beyond GM is a new initiative, aiming to re-engage the public and raise the level of debate on GMOs in the UK. The initiative, which was launched this year, already has two campaigns under its belt.**

The Letter from America, signed by groups and individuals representing 57 million Americans – from NGOs, farming, progressive and healthcare groups to celebrities such as Susan Sarandon and Daryl Hannah – details the problems of 20 years of growing and eating GMOs in the US. It was launched on 12 November with a full page letter in the Times, a huge digital billboard at London Waterloo and an all-star delegation to Downing St. Since the launch US citizens have been asked to keep signing the letter, resulting in another 10,000 endorsements. In the UK citizens are asked to send a copy to their MPs – see [www.theletterfromamerica.org](http://www.theletterfromamerica.org) to take part.

GM Free Me ([www.gmfreeme.org](http://www.gmfreeme.org)) is a 'visual petition' where you can upload your photo and thoughts on keeping the UK GM Free. The organisers are hoping to get 100,000 photos by election time 2015 and we've submitted ours so hope that you will too.

Alongside these initiatives, Beyond GM will be reaching out to mothers, gardeners, students and faith groups to encourage them to join the bigger conversation about GMOs and how they will impact the daily lives of citizens throughout the UK. Find out more at [beyond-gm.org](http://beyond-gm.org).

**"We should not be asking, 'How will we feed the world?' but 'How can we help end poverty?' Claiming that increasing yield would feed the poor is like saying that producing more cars or private jets would guarantee that everyone had one."**

*Mark Bittman, New York Times, 11 November 2014*

**"I used to line up and get my latte every day, but yesterday was my last one."**

*Musician Neil Young boycotts Starbucks over its part in a lawsuit against Vermont's GM labelling law*

## GM Freeze in the News

● Rothamsted Research's trial of Camelina plants genetically modified to produce omega 3 "fish oils" attracted a new flurry of press coverage in recent months, focused on the hardly surprising fact that they have now harvested the first year's trial crop. We commented in the Telegraph and Daily Mail, and Director Liz O'Neill appeared on BBC Look East and BBC One's Countryfile which is viewed by a phenomenal five million people.



Liz O'Neill, Director of GM Freeze

- In November Liz appeared on BBC Radio 5 Live, going head to head with Jonathan Jones from the John Innes Centre, in a piece that also included a recorded interview with Vivienne Westwood at the launch of Beyond GM's Letter from America (see page 3).
- Other recent press coverage includes GM in M&S (Daily Mail – see page 2), a comment on the non-renewal of Anne Glover's position as EU Chief Scientist (Daily Mail) and a defence of the importance of social, ethical and environmental issues as valid considerations in food and farming policy (Guardian).
- You can find GM Freeze press releases, comments and details of press coverage featuring GM Freeze at [www.gmfreeze.org/press](http://www.gmfreeze.org/press) but please bear in mind that access to radio and TV programmes is often removed by the broadcaster after a few days or weeks.

### Huge new study launched

**The Russian National Association for Genetic Safety (NAGS) launched what it describes as the world's largest international study on GMO safety with a press conference in London on 11 November.**

At a total cost of \$25million, Factor GMO is a major new project and the organisers stress heavily the independent nature of the study which will be overseen by an international review board of senior scientists. It will consider the toxicity, carcinogenicity and multi-generational effects of a particular GM maize variety and the herbicide it is designed to be used alongside, through long term feeding trials on rats over five generations.

Commenting on the unusual move to

go public at the very start of the study, Soil Association policy director Peter Melchett said "I welcome this. It has been a scientific fraud that no scientific study like this has been done in the past." [www.factorgmo.com](http://www.factorgmo.com)

### Next generation GM crops coming our way

**On 16 October, the American Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) approved Dow Chemical's "Enlist Duo" weedkiller (which combines Roundup and 2,4-D) for use on the second generation of GM crops.**

Alongside public outcry at home, the move was met with great concern here in the UK. GM Freeze members GeneWatch explained that GM maize and soya resistant to Enlist will be

planted next year in the United States and blanket sprayed with the new combined weedkiller. These GM crops are likely to be imported to the UK next year for use in animal feed.

GeneWatch UK Director Helen Wallace said that "these second-generation GM crops will exacerbate harm to wildlife through habitat destruction, leave toxic residues of pesticides in the food chain, and worsen the superweed problem in the longer term. Unless supermarkets act now to secure GM-free-fed meat, milk and eggs, British consumers will be contributing unwittingly to an environmental disaster. UK and EU supermarkets should ban the use of 2,4-D GM crops in their supply lines".

You can find out more at [tinyurl.com/p49yl2s](http://tinyurl.com/p49yl2s).

### Let us know what you think

This issue of *Thin Ice* includes less international news than in the past, focusing instead on UK developments and our own recent activities. We are also printing in colour as it turns out to be cheaper!

Please email [liz@gmfreeze.org](mailto:liz@gmfreeze.org) to let us know if you like the change, if you would prefer things back as they were, or if you have any other comments or requests for *Thin Ice*.

## The GM Freeze Campaign is calling for a freeze on:

- The growing of genetically modified plants and the production of genetically modified farm animals for any commercial purpose.
- Imports of genetically modified foods, plants, farm crops and farm animals, and produce from genetically modified plants and animals.
- The patenting of genetic resources for food and farm crops.

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