

NGOs v. industry lobby on new breeding techniques

At the time of writing, the European Commission is poised to issue a crucial decision on whether or not a set of seven genetic engineering techniques should be classified as GM. The decision was due in January (as reported in [Thin Ice 38](#)) but is now expected in March.

Environmental charities, campaigners, organic farming representatives and others have been working hard to make the case for regulation, with Brussels briefings and a range of reports, position statements and media articles, which we have pulled together on our website at www.gmfreeze.org/nbt:

- The International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements (IFOAM) EU Group's position paper, published in December 2015, states clearly that:
"The IFOAM EU Group considers that the NPBTs (**New Plant Breeding Technologies, or NBTs**) ... should be, without question, considered as techniques of genetic modification leading to GMOs according to the existing EU legal definition and that the

What's in a name?

Most organisations, including the European Commission, now refer to the seven genetic engineering techniques under consideration as 'New [Plant] Breeding Techniques' but that phrase is the result of a sustained 'branding' exercise by the industry promoting their use. As Angelika Hilbeck, senior researcher at the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology, says: "*New breeding techniques* is a misleading term, precisely because the users of these techniques aim to avoid any breeding."

Alongside the 'natural' connotations of the word "breeding", the terms 'gene editing' or 'genome editing', are being widely used to imply surgical precision and suggest that these new forms of GM offer absolute technological control. Some of the new methods can target specific points in the genome, but, precision is not the same as predictability. "It's like changing letters in words and words in text in a language one does not understand.", says Hilbeck. "That can be done with precision and control, yet with complete oblivion to the meaning."

Commission should explicitly confirm that they fall within the scope of the GMO legislation (Directive 2001/18/EC and Regulation 1829/2003).

"It is of crucial importance for the organic sector that these new techniques that engineer living organisms through technical, chemical or biotechnological intervention in the cell and/or nucleus be ... subject to the

mandatory traceability and labelling requirements that apply to other GMOs."

- A Greenpeace Research Laboratories **Technical Report**¹ focuses on the legal interpretation of EU directives.
- Dr Ricarda A Steinbrecher's **EcoNexus briefing**² focuses on the scientific reasons why these techniques are neither as precise nor as predictable as those promoting them would have us believe (*Thin Ice 38*).

All are available via our webpage www.gmfreeze.org/nbt, as is an open letter from **GM Freeze member GeneWatch UK** to the European Commission.

The case being made by all these organisations is that the seven

¹ Application of the EU and Cartagena definitions of a GMO to the classification of plants developed by cisgenesis and gene editing techniques

² New Breeding Techniques: inherent risks and the need to regulate

■ TAKE ACTION

Two new applications for open air trials of GM crops are currently being considered by Defra. Rothamsted Research has applied for an additional "fish oil" camelina trial at its farm in Hertfordshire, while the Sainsbury's Laboratory is hoping to plant **GM blight-resistant potatoes** at the Norwich Research Park. Objections can be made until 19 March for Rothamsted's camelina and 22 March for Sainsbury's Lab's potatoes. GM Freeze is currently considering both applications with a view to responding formally. If you represent a member organisation who might be interested in joining a shared response, or if you would like support in responding on your own behalf, please contact Raoul Bhambral, GM Freeze Co-ordinator on raoul@gmfreeze.org or 0845 217 8992.

NEW BREEDING TECHNIQUES

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techniques under consideration must be regulated. They alter the DNA of living organisms in a way that shares many of the problems of more established GM techniques, as well as bringing new concerns of their own. They have no history of safe use and many of them are so new that little is known about how they work or what could go wrong.

However, we face a strong and well-resourced opposition. Following three years of Freedom of Information requests, Corporate Europe Observatory exposed industry attempts to influence the classification of the techniques [in a new report](#)³. Published in February 2016, the report highlights the coordinating efforts of the New Breeding Techniques platform whose stated objective is to have “all NBTs – or as many as possible – exempt from GM legislation”.

³ Biotech lobby's push for new GMOs to escape regulation

■ TAKE ACTION

Please write to Vytenis Andriukaitis, the European Commissioner for Health and Food Safety to let him know that EU citizens want to see these techniques properly regulated. Feel free to use the points we raise in your own words. You can write to him at The European Commission, Rue de la Loi / Wetstraat 200, 1049 1049 Brussels, Belgium or email on vytenis.andriukaitis@ec.europa.eu. Other details and a guide on what it might be useful to say are on our website at www.gmfreeze.org/nbt.

Supporters signed up for email alerts have already started taking this action. Please sign up too to make sure you hear about urgent actions first, www.gmfreeze.org/emails.

GM ALFALFA GOES WILD

The US Department of Agriculture's coexistence policy has been called into question thanks to [GM alfalfa growing wild](#) in parts of the American West. Seed spilt during transport is thought to be the main cause of the contamination but there is also clear evidence of bees causing cross-pollination between wild and cultivated GM alfalfa. The feral GM alfalfa may help explain a number of transgenic contamination episodes over the past few years that have cost American alfalfa growers and exporters millions of dollars in lost revenue. For instance, China has a zero tolerance policy for GM alfalfa.

COST OF LABELLING GM IS 'NEGLIGIBLE'

Campbell Soup Co. has announced that it will label all its products in the US that contain GM, without increasing the price of its products. It is the first major food company to break ranks with the Grocery Manufacturers Association's (GMA) position against mandatory labelling of GM, which claims the cost of labelling would be passed on to consumers.



However this is no heroic move from the company. It will still carry products containing GM and it believes GM is safe and has a role to play in 'feeding the world'. It has spent nearly \$1 million defeating pro-labelling laws in other states, back when it was firmly in the GMA's corner.

It would seem Campbell is doing this to stay ahead of the labelling debate underway in the USA, particularly in Vermont where the state's mandatory labelling law is set to take effect on 1 July. Since then it has recognised that 92% of consumers are in favour of 'putting it on the label' and that it doesn't like the idea of laws varying from state to state. It expects to finish rolling out its labels within 12-18 months.

Is it just about the science?

The arguments over the classification of the new genetic engineering techniques focus on scientific and legal definitions, but the Nuffield Council on Bioethics recently issued a call for evidence on genome editing with a much wider remit. GM Freeze's response included the following points:

- Genome editing techniques share many of the same risks as current Genetic Modification (GM) methods and also present a number of additional potential problems. There is much that can go wrong and it is vital that new techniques are subject to proper regulation, traceability and end-product labelling.
- Public concern about GM in our food is high¹ and increasing² but opposition to GM is frequently characterised as unscientific, emotional and even superstitious.
- Many people's concerns are focused on scientific risk. However, as most people in the UK have not benefitted from a scientific education, they express concepts such as 'off-target' and 'unexpected effects' in less precise language. It is entirely unacceptable to dismiss the views of individuals who do not have the vocabulary to express themselves in scientifically-accurate terms.
- Beyond the narrowly-defined issues of scientific risk, cultural and ethical values are vital considerations in the adoption of any new technology. Food production in particular is closely tied up with our cultural, ethnic and family identities. However, the language used by proponents of genetic engineering frequently dismisses and belittles such a focus on values as weak and inappropriate.

¹ Food Standards Agency, May 2015 Biannual Public Attitudes Tracker

² Food Standards Agency, February 2015 Biannual Public Attitudes Tracker

MEPs object to GM soybean imports

In February the **European Parliament objected** to the import of three GM soybeans into the EU for use as food and feed. It said the Commission's proposal to authorise the GM soybeans, resistant to either glyphosate alone or glyphosate combined with other herbicides, was "not consistent with Union law" that aims at a high level of health and environmental protection. Parliament's objection is not legally binding on the Commission, but it does send it a strong message.

That message is building as this is the third time in a few months that Parliament has clashed with the Commission over its GM policy. In October, MEPs rejected a flawed proposal that would give national governments a fake right to ban GM crops approved for import. They called

on the Commission to develop a new proposal (*Thin Ice* 38).

Last December, Parliament voted to reject the import of a GM maize and called for a moratorium on GM authorisations until new rules are introduced. Like the February vote, this was a largely symbolic vote as MEPs do not have the power to change this decision.

"Importing these GM soybeans could expose consumers and farm animals in the EU to adverse effects from the herbicides they have been sprayed with and, to date, the effects of "the herbicide plus GMO combination has not been assessed. Neither have the herbicide cocktails proposed. No herbicide-tolerant GMOs should be authorised until this has been done."

Eric Gall, IFOAM EU

Euro Commission challenged on GM soybean approval

The European Commission has written to **Testbiotech and GeneWatch UK** admitting that there are currently no methods for testing for the effects of multiple pesticide residues, yet it is considering approval of a GM soya bean that is resistant to multiple pesticides.

Commissioner Vytenis Andriukaitis wrote, *"It is true that the legislation requires cumulative and synergistic effects of pesticide residues to be considered... but only when the methods for assessment will be available. This is not yet the case."*

This was in response to calls from the two campaign groups to halt the authorisation process. The Soil Association has already found glyphosate residues in UK bread (*Thin Ice* 37) and the same residues were found in the urine of 40% of a test group of participants in Germany.

India

On 2 February the **Indian Supreme Court** demanded that its central government explain the proposed introduction of three GM herbicide-tolerant crops in the face of a court-imposed ban. The top court has passed a series of orders¹ to restrain small-scale and large-scale field trials in any food crops as well as their commercial introduction in the country. However a 'contempt petition' has been filed against members of the Genetic Engineering Approval Committee for flouting court orders by conducting both small- and large-scale field trials of all three crops with a view to commercialisation. The government had two weeks in which to respond to these and other charges.

United States

This 26 January, **Monsanto filed a lawsuit** against the state of California's Office of Environmental Health Hazard Assessment to prevent it from adding glyphosate to the state's list of known carcinogens. California law requires the state to keep a list of cancer-causing chemicals to inform residents of the risks of using such products; guided by the World Health Organisation's International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC). Monsanto has accused IARC of being an 'unelected, undemocratic, unaccountable and foreign body' as it is not subject to state or federal oversight. Two days later, a **California couple returned fire** by suing Monsanto for cancer they believe is caused by exposure to Monsanto's leading herbicide, RoundUp.

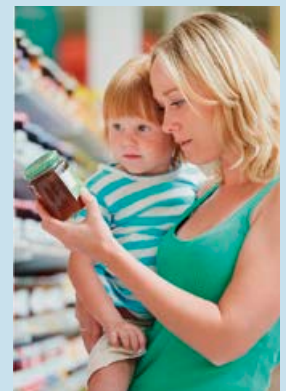
1 February 2007, April 2008 and August 2008

Still in the States, a new report² claims that **people have fundamentally changed the way they shop**. Traditional factors like price, taste and convenience are taking a back seat in favour of other influences, like health and wellbeing, social impact and transparency. Consumers define health and wellbeing as going beyond health and nutrition to include organic production and natural ingredients. Social impact includes local sourcing, sustainability and animal welfare. Transparency issues include clear labelling and certification by trusted third parties. Interestingly, large food companies are 3.4 times more likely to be distrusted by consumers than larger companies in other industries.

Brazil

In January, Brazil's Ministry of Justice imposed fines totalling roughly \$3 million on six global food giants, including Nestle and PepsiCo, for **failing to disclose GM ingredients** in their products. This follows six years on from an inspection by the Consumer Protection Agency that found GM in products from cake mix to snacks which were not labelled with the 'transgenic' symbol required by Brazilian law.

2 Capitalizing on the shifting consumer food value equation, 25 Jan 2016



Feed: The Facts

Most people in the UK don't eat food made from GM ingredients. However, the vast majority of non-organic farm animals are fed GM soya and/or maize, which does not need to be listed on the label of the food it goes to produce.

We recognise there are logistical and supply problems with GM-free animal feed but they will be overcome if the supermarkets, manufacturers and wholesalers believe that doing so will sell more finished products.

GM Freeze is gearing up to launch a new campaign to highlight this issue of 'hidden' GM in the supply chain. We will be focusing on a small number of target companies, getting customers to let them know that they want GM-free feed for their animal products like eggs, poultry, meat, dairy and fish. We are hoping to get at least one target to change their policy but are also looking to raise broader public awareness of the issue.



■ TAKE ACTION

We will need your help. There will be lots of action requests for this campaign so please make sure you are signed up for email alerts, by going to www.gmfreeze.org/emails or ticking the box on your renewal form. In the meantime, though, please tell us if you have a favourite brand, product, retailer or food company that you think should be completely GM-free by emailing raoul@gmfreeze.org.

NEWS JUST IN

A new paper by Charles Benbrook shows how glyphosate use has risen almost 15-fold since 'Roundup Ready' GM crops were introduced in 1996. Published in *Environmental Sciences Europe*, 2 February 2016

GM Freeze in the spotlight

Our local media volunteers had some notable success in December, with stories about the pending European Commission decision on new breeding techniques appearing in the *Western Mail*, [WalesOnline](#) and [Isle of Man Today](#). If you would like help getting more media coverage for GM issues in your local press, please contact Raoul@gmfreeze.org or 0845 217 8992.

GM Freeze Director Liz O'Neill contributed to an article in *The Observer* (7 February) about the pending European Commission decision on the status of gene editing techniques and her long awaited appearance on *Tomorrow's Food* hit the airwaves on 24 February. If you missed it, watch it on the BBC One website until 24 March. Also on 24 February, as we were going to press, the issue of hidden GM in animal feed made headlines and Liz gave interviews to LBC Radio and the *Daily Mail*.

No scheduling problems beset the hugely successful

Oxford Real Farming Conference in January, where GM Freeze hosted a lively discussion on the topic *How can we win the war of words on GM?* Our aim was to help people explain the core problems with GM in very simple phrases such as these examples:

- GM crops make farming and food production irresponsible, unfair and unsustainable.
- You may not eat GM but the animals that make your meat, milk and eggs do and it isn't on the label.
- There's enough food for double the world population but people go hungry due to power, politics and poverty. People need food sovereignty, not GM crops.

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GM Freeze is working to help create a world in which our food is produced responsibly, fairly and sustainably. We consider and raise the profile of concerns about the impact of genetic modification. We inform, inspire, represent and support those who share our concerns. We campaign for a moratorium on GM food and farming in the UK. We oppose the patenting of genetic resources.



A referenced version of this newsletter is available online - <http://www.gmfreeze.org/thinice>

GM Freeze, c/o 80 Cyprus Street, Stretford, Manchester, M32 8BE. info@gmfreeze.org 0845 217 8992 [@gmfreeze](https://twitter.com/gmfreeze)

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