

Freeze Update



Time for Action!

Charles Secrett, Executive Director of Friends of the Earth, on why the next eighteen months are critical in the GM debate.

Since the Five Year Freeze coalition (FYF) was formed, the drive by government and industry to push GM foods and crops onto the market has all but halted. This is a tremendous validation of the arguments and tactics employed by a range of groups, activists and communities, including the Freeze. But, three years on, the debate over whether or not the UK (or the EU) should grow and eat GM crops and food is entering a significant and critical phase.

I would urge members of Freeze to follow the decision-making process extremely closely. We all have to be on guard against the sneaky machinations of government and biotech industry advocates. We must fully and positively take part in the coming public and political debates to ensure that decisions are based on the best available scientific information, and that social, environmental and ethical priorities determine final conclusions.

The Farm Scales Trials (FST) to assess the wildlife impacts of weedkiller-tolerant GM crops growing on farmland are entering their final stages. Decisions about commercial growing will follow.

Although the inadequate FSTs have studiously ignored the problems of cross-pollination between crops and crop relatives, the issue has come to the fore because of the Government's need to set an acceptable threshold at which labelling of GM content in food and animal feed becomes mandatory. European Union regulations on traceability and labelling of GM

ingredients has forced the question on how to maintain levels of seed purity below the proposed 1% threshold for food and feed (itself a sop to biotech companies). This, in turn, has highlighted the problem of how, if at all, GM and non-GM/organic crops can be grown in such a crowded countryside as ours. The Government has promised a full debate this year. This is an ideal opportunity to establish whether the UK can cope with commercial growing of GM without insurmountable legal, economic and environmental problems.

The EU legislation on labelling animal feed, and the revised UK regulations on the Deliberate Release of GMOs, will also be agreed this year. The EU may also ratify the Cartagena Protocol on Bio-safety; which will be a catalyst for debates and decisions on who will be liable if GM technology goes wrong (the protocol requires proposals on liability to be brought forward).

After the FSTs end in the summer of 2003, decisions on the future of GM crops will be made some time in late 2003/early 2004. This too will be preceded by further public debate.

So, there is no lack of opportunities for people and communities concerned about the future of farming to have their say on whether GM crops and food should be part of 21st century farming in Britain.

Believe me, activism and lobbying by citizens, and the organisations they belong to, will make a critical difference in the final outcome. The Freeze campaign will keep you informed and up-to-date. If you don't want GMs in agriculture, please act with the rest of us when you are asked to get stuck in! Thanks.

The Supporters of The Five Year Freeze are:

Action Aid, Action Against Allergy, Additives Survivors' Network, Agricultural Christian Fellowship, Baby Milk Action, Bakers, Food and Allied Workers Union, Biodynamic Agricultural Association, Black Environmental Network, Body Shop International PLC, British Allergy Foundation, British Association of Fair Trade Shops, British Association of Nature Conservation, British Naturopathic Association, Caduceus, Catholic Institute International Relations, Centre for Alternative Technology, Chartered Institute of Environmental Health, Christian Aid, Christian Ecology Link, Communities Against Toxics, Compassion In World Farming, Corporate Watch, Council for the Protection of Rural England, Culpepers, Ecologist, Ecology Building Society, Elm Farm Research Centre, Ethical Consumer, Econexus, Farm-A-Round Ltd, Farming and Livestock Concern, Federation of City Farms and Community Gardens, Find Your Feet, Food Commission, Food for Health Network, Food Poverty Network, Forum for the Future, Fresh Food Company, Freshlands UK, Friends of the Earth, Friends of the Earth Scotland, Gaia Foundation, Gardeners GMO Group, GE Free Forests, Genetics Food Alert, Genetics Forum, GeneWatch UK, GMO Campaign, Good Gardeners Association, Green & Blacks, Green Books, Green Network, Green Party, Greenpeace, Guild of Fine Food Retailers, Guild of Food Writers, Harvest Help, HDRA, Health Food Manufacturer's Association, HIPPO, Hyperactive Children's Support Group, Iceland Foods, Institute for Science in Society, Intermediate Technology Development Group, International Society for Ecology and Culture, Islamic Concern, Islamic Foundation for Ecology and Environment Sciences, Living Lightly, Local Government Association, Longhouse Food Consultancy, Maternity Alliance, Medact, Muslim Council of Great Britain, National Association of Health Stores, National Federation of Women's Institutes, National Society of Allotment and Leisure Gardeners Ltd, Natural Law Party, Natures Store Ltd., Neal's Yard Bakery, Neal's Yard Remedies, New Economics Foundation, New Internationalist, Noah Project, Organic Farm Foods Wales, Organic Gardening, Organic Shop, Organics Direct, Oxfam, People & Planet, Permaculture Association UK, Permaculture Magazine, Permanent Publications, Pesticides Action Network UK, Plamil FoodPlanet Organic, Positive News, Pret A Manger, Resurgence, Scientists for Global Responsibility, Scottish Consumers Association for Natural Food, Small Farms Association, Soil Association, Student Environment Network, TGWU, The Harbour, Townswomen's Guilds, Traidcraft Plc, Triodos Bank, Unison, Vegan Society, Vegetarian Society, Network UK, Vinceremos Wines & Spirits Ltd, Whole Earth Foods Ltd, Wholesome Food Association, Wildlife Trusts, Womankind Worldwide, Women's Environmental Network, Woodland Trust, World Development Movement, World Wide Fund for Nature.

The Five Year Freeze is also supported by over 45 local authorities and 200 wholefood shops, restaurants and other local businesses.

In supporting the Five Year Freeze each of the above organisations is indicating its formal support in those areas where it has specific competence. Each also acknowledges the arguments of the other supporters of the Five Year Freeze in their respective fields in relation to the campaign. In addition each organisation supports the overall call for a Five Year Freeze.

Five Year Freeze, 94 White Lion Street, London N1 9PF

Tel: 020 7837 0642. Fax: 020 7837 1141

Email: enquiry@fiveyearfreeze.org



...news...

First GM labelling prosecution

A Midlands firm was fined £4,000 and £12,000 costs for not labelling soya mince which contained over 50% GMOs. The company has since switched to sourcing GM-free identity-preserved soya.

How green is your GM lawn?

In the US a company is ready to market GM grass – requiring less cutting and withstanding repeated doses of weed killers – which as a result, according to the marketing, will also help curb air pollution from lawn mowers and ‘allow more time to play golf or spend time with the kids.’

GM fish free Maryland

Maryland has become the first US state to bring into law a five-year moratorium on the release of GM fish in an effort to protect the Chesapeake Bay

Chardon LL Hearing resumes

The public hearing into placing the first GM seed, Chardon LL maize, on to the national seed listing resumes again in April. The hearing was suspended 16 months ago when it was disclosed that some of the required testing had not been carried out.

.....and Sheridan may be next

The Government is currently considering a second GM maize seed, Sheridan, for National Seed Listing in the very near future. Another public hearing will be called so be ready to object.

Bid to protect ‘Basmati’ rice’

The Food Standards Agency is consulting on plans to protect the term ‘Basmati’ - the fragrant rice grown for centuries at the foothills of the Himalayas.

<http://www.food.gov.uk/news/newsarchive/51715>

Strike in South Africa

The Food and Allied Workers' Union (Fawu) in South Africa is threatening to strike if a bid to impose a five year moratorium on GM food in SA fails.

News on the Farm Scale Trials

The Farm Scale Trials programme enters its final phase with the recent announcement of over 100 spring planting sites. One more final planting of winter oilseed rape will take place this autumn. DEFRA has published a provisional timetable for the remainder of the programme, with the results being presented on an individual crop basis, in two tranches. The results of the spring-sown crops will be published and available to the public for comment in Summer 2003, and for winter-sown rape in Summer 2004.

New sites

DEFRA was hoping to find new farms for at least half of the sites this spring in order to avoid becoming too dependent on a small base of farmers, and thereby reducing the range of variation of farm management included within the study. By going through the list of trial sites since 1999, it has been calculated that at best only a third of the trials announced this year involve farms new to the study. This further calls into question the scientific credibility of the trials, which are failing even to reach the criteria of the committee overseeing them never mind their critics.

Separation distances

Controversy also remains over the buffer zones between GM and non-GM crops, with no changes having been made to the separation distances despite the Secretary of State for the Environment, Margaret Beckett, admitting that current distances may not be enough to adequately stop GM crops cross-pollinating other crops. She said: *"the separation distances for the [farm scale trials] have been set to ensure that cross-pollination is a maximum of*

1%. However... there is a case for separation distances to be greater so as to ensure a maximum of, for example, 0.1% cross-pollination". The current separation distances between GM and non-GM are 200m for sweet corn and organic maize but only 80m for conventional fodder maize.

Local opposition

The concern of local communities where the trials are sited shows no sign of diminishing as the end approaches. At a recent ‘Last Chance’ rally in Stratford on Avon, five protestors were arrested for criminal damage after a visit to the nearby trial site at Long Marston. And organic farmer Donnie MacLeod became the first Scot to be given a prison sentence over GM crop protests when he refused to identify other protestors involved in a demonstration at Munlochy, Inverness. Donnie is due to spend 21 days in jail. One farmer in Somerset has already withdrawn from the programme after concern was raised by a neighbouring farmer, Michael Eavis, and the local community. Dorset is home to fifteen trials this spring – with five taking place in just one village.

The Munlochy Vigil

Local residents near the Munlochy site have maintained a non-stop vigil since August, even being granted planning permission for their yurts and caravans by the local council. Their observation of the progress of the crops has produced some interesting results. The GM oil seed rape on the site appears to be severely stunted in comparison to the non-GM crops raising questions about its stability and the management of the two crops.

Public Debate

One of the keystones of the Five Year Freeze’s demands during the period of a moratorium is for a full and informed public debate to take place. The AEBC recommended in their report ‘Crops on Trial’ that indeed such a debate should take place, and Margaret Beckett’s response has indicated that finally the Government are willing to instigate such a project. The AEBC have been asked to come up with a proposal for how this should be approached and report back to Government by the end of April.

For any public debate to be effective and of value it must be as inclusive as

possible, be seen to be independent and participants must feel that the results of the process matter and will influence policy. For an issue such as GM foods, where so many members of the public have demonstrated their concern, this is going to be a tall order. However, initial signs are that the AEBC sub-group working on the proposals are approaching the task aware of this and with the desire to not replicate the dry and uninspiring public consultation normally carried out by Government departments.

Initial plans include, alongside the more normal tools such as focus groups and

Act Now on Labelling and Traceability!

The EU Commission's proposals on Labelling and Traceability of GM foods and feed (see last Freeze Update) are making their way through the various committees of the Parliament. This is the time to be writing to MEPs, particularly those on the Environment Committee, who are the first to scrutinize the proposals.

Summary of the proposals:

Good:

- ensure that the GMOs can be identified and labelled throughout the food and feed chain
- facilitate the monitoring of health and environment effects of GMOs and the withdrawal of any harmful products.
- the loophole, which allows biotech companies to shortcut full safety assessment procedures on the basis of "substantial equivalence", would be discontinued
- introduces authorisation and labelling of GM animal feed
- improves consumer choice through labelling - all GMO-derived foods will have to be labelled

Bad:

- animal products such as meat, milk and eggs from GM-fed animals would not be subject to labelling
- exemptions from the proposal are made for the "adventitious" or "technically unavoidable" presence of GMOs up to a threshold of 1% and including GMOs that have not been approved in the EU.
- the proposal does not include traceability of animal products such as meat, milk and eggs from animals fed on GMOs

citizens juries, the production of a film to be sent to schools, WIs and community groups, an interactive TV event, consensus conferences, and other innovative means to stimulate debate. The process will most likely begin this autumn/winter and continue until the summer of next year when the first results from the trials will be available.

Whatever the AEBC proposes however may not meet with Government approval – it may get watered down, the framework may be narrower than hoped for, there may not be enough resources or will to carry out as ambitious a programme as the

- exemptions from the proposal are made for the "adventitious" or "technically unavoidable" presence of GMOs. This includes GMOs that have not been approved in the EU and such contamination will be allowed up to a threshold of 1%.

The official UK position is to *not* support the proposals so it is important that we let the EU politicians know what UK consumers want – and they have consistently indicated the desire for full GM labelling, including GM-derived products and animal produce. There will be heavy lobbying by industry and US representatives to water down the proposals, and to introduce a 'GM-free' label.

Why do we not want a GM-free label?

- Denies choice to low income consumers as it will be more expensive
- Would result in at least three tiers of GM labelling:
 - ◆ labelled GM products over the 1% threshold
 - ◆ no labelling because products are under the 1%
 - ◆ 'GM-free' resulting in confusion for consumers
- The onus of a 'GM-free' label would be on the GM free producer to prove GM-free status – rather than on the owner or user of the technology

AEBC, and the Freeze, would like to see. However it is our intention to ensure that this does happen, and once the proposals have been published we will be looking to see what part the Freeze can play in the process. With a network of over 120 organisations and four million members we are well positioned to ensure that as many people as possible engage with the process making it a worthwhile exercise. We hope that our supporters will similarly be prepared to play a part in this too.

For more information on the AEBC's work in this area visit their website www.aebc.gov.uk



action...action...action

Write to your MEP – to find out who it is call 020 7227 4300 or got to www.europarl.org.uk
For a briefing on the issue and the contact details of members of the Environment Committee please contact the Freeze office on 020 7837 0642 or enquiry@fiveyearfreeze.org

...recent research...

A recent report from the **French Food Safety Agency** has said that more testing is needed to evaluate the long-term health risks of GM food and highlights the need to minimize the risks of allergies: www.afssa.fr

The **UK Royal Society** recently published 'Genetically modified plants for food use and human health – an update', advising precaution in relation to baby foods and allergies, including inhalant allergies: www.royalsoc.ac.uk

English Nature have published a report looking at GM oilseed rape in Canada, 'Gene-stacking in herbicide-tolerant oilseed rape: lessons from the North American experience', highlighting the enormous problems of gene stacking and volunteer plants and the need to avoid them were it to be grown in the UK: <http://www.english-nature.org.uk/>

The **European Environment Agency** has published 'The significance of gene flow through pollen transfer' highlighting the strong risks of cross-pollination from oilseed rape, sugar beet and maize - three key GM crops currently being trialed in the UK: http://reports.eea.eu.int/environmental_issue_report_2002_28/en

The National Academies' **National Research Council** in the US recently published 'Environmental Effects of Transgenic Plants: The Scope and Adequacy of Regulation', calling for more rigorous approval testing for GM foods and increased public involvement: <http://www.nap.edu>.

Freeze Early Day Motion

It's not too late to get your MP to sign the Freeze Early Day Motion – so far 67 have done so! The MPs who have signed up are:

Diane Abbott, Norman Baker, Harry Barnes, John Barrett, A J Beith, Harold Best, Menzies Campbell, Martin Caton, Iain Coleman, Brian Cotter, Ann Cryer, John Cryer, Jim Cunningham, Edward Davey, Terry Davis, Janet Dean, Andrew Dismore, Jim Dobbin, Jeffrey M. Donaldson, David Drew, Huw Edwards, Clive Efford, Bill Etherington, Michael Fallon, Mark Fisher, Don Foster, Andrew George, Matthew Green, Win Griffiths, Mike Hancock, Kate Hoey, Paul Holmes, Kelvin Hopkins, Nigel Jones, Norman Lamb, Jackie Lawrence, Elfyn Llwyd, Alice Mahon, Paul Marsden, John McDonnell, Eddie McGrady, Lembit Opik, Stephen Pound, Adam Price, Joan Ruddock, Bob Russell, Adrian Sanders, Brian Sedgemore, Alan Simpson, he Reverend Martin Smyth, David Stewart, Paul Stinchcombe, Andrew Stunell, David Taylor, Matthew Taylor, Sir Teddy Taylor, Simon Thomas, Dr JennyTonge, Paul Tyler, Dr Rudi Vis, Joan Walley, Robert N Wareing, John Wilkinson, Mike Wood.

Early Day Motion 499: Five Year Freeze

That this House welcomes the audit of Government policy on genetically modified farm crops and food published by the FiveYear Freeze; notes that current policies fail to address the many outstanding scientific, ethical, social and economic issues raised by the introduction of GM technology into the food chain; calls upon the Government to introduce a freeze on the growing of genetically modified crops in the UK until such time that a comprehensive assessment of research needs, that is both independent and public, has been made and acted upon; particularly taking into consideration the impact of GM on the future of UK agriculture; and until such a time that effective regulatory procedures are in place in compliance with current European Commission proposals on traceability, labelling and liability.



...news...

Swedish farmers reject GM

A recent opinion poll in Sweden shows that 77% of Swedish farmers will not consider growing GM crops on their land. Answers vary slightly according to region, with small farm and animal farming regions more negative. Only 15% explicitly state that they are positive to growing GMOs.

Go Ahead for Bt Cotton in India

Despite strong opposition from farmers in India, the Government has given the go-ahead to the commercial growing of GM Bt Cotton, subject to certain conditions, yet to be disclosed.

...diary...

Tues 16th April: What is natural?

Royal Institution, London W1
Greenpeace/New Scientist debate with Patrick Holden, Richard Dawkins and others.

Tickets available on 020 7670 2985 or email: bookings@ri.ac.uk
Part of a series of debates on 'Science, technology and our future: the big questions'.

Wednesday 17th April:

Global Day of Farmers' Struggle.

Protests against GM and patents.
www.campesina.org

Saturday 18th May:

UK GM campaigners day run by Friends of the Earth, Five Year Freeze, GeneWatch, Greenpeace, Genetic Engineering Alliance.

For more info call: 020 7837 0642 or email: enquiry@fiveyearfreeze.org

Visit the Freeze website:
www.fiveyearfreeze.org

enquiry@fiveyearfreeze.org

Access to the Rice Genome

A row has broken out over public access to the complete DNA sequence of the rice plant, decoded last year by Syngenta. Scientists fear there will be restrictions over who can use the data when it is published in an academic journal. Leading geneticists, including two British Nobel Prize winners, have written to the journal Science to complain. They claim a multinational company will have control over the most important food crop in the developing world if an alleged publication deal goes ahead.

Since the 1980s, scientists have been releasing raw data on the genetic codes of various animals and plants in a public database, known as Genbank. Everything

stored on the database is freely available for all scientists to work on. There has been one notable exception. In February last year, human genome data gathered by the US biotech company Celera was published in Science.

Under a special arrangement, Celera was able to publish its data without depositing it in Genbank. Some scientists believe the move has set an unwelcome precedent.

They are concerned the same thing may happen with rice. Syngenta is still finalising the terms of public access to the rice genome information. According to ActionAid, 250 patents on rice have been granted so far, eleven of which belong to Syngenta.

Stay in touch!

If you don't normally receive this bi-monthly newsletter and would like to, please write to us at **Five Year Freeze, 94 White Lion Street, London N1 9PF.**

A minimum £5 donation is asked to cover printing and postage.

If you are able to distribute this newsletter to events/local shops/farmers markets please contact Clare at the Five Year Freeze and let her know how many you would like. *Please make cheques payable to 'The Five Year Freeze'*