

# Freeze Update



## Gene Futures: kick-starting the debate

Should GM crops be grown in the UK? This was the question shaping discussion at the Gene Futures conference in February organised by the Five Year Freeze, Elm Farm Research Centre, GeneWatch, Unilever and the Guardian. The conference brought together key individuals from the scientific, regulatory, agricultural and policy communities to explore and challenge the options and provided the opportunity to hear the range of views relating to commercialisation of GM crops for the UK.

Environment Minister Michael Meacher presented the Governments' current position on GM crops and explained the intentions of the public debate. He said that the approach to GM "must be based on the precautionary principle", but also stated that the issues which need addressing would lead to rules which would have to be "practical, enforceable and proportionate". He also addressed the issue of separation distances and cross pollination, stating the need to "best protect the interests of all farmers, including organic farmers", which is an area severely lacking in regulation currently. Presentations then followed which questioned the ability of science to predict impacts of GM crops, asking if GM crops will enhance or degrade the environment, how important are GM crops for UK agriculture and how to provide consumer choice in a global market.

The afternoon began with Dr. Suman Sahai of Gene Campaign, India, to give a perspective of the role of GM and food security. Setting the issue of GM in a global context, we heard about the challenges for developing countries, for instance how agricultural infrastructures differ vastly from the western world, not just in terms of legislative capacity, but storage and transport and the problems it causes for segregation.

### INSIDE

See plans of the Governments Public Debate on GM and how you can get involved!

Panel presentations followed, made up of representatives from the Consumers Association, the National Farmers Union, Friends of the Earth and the John Innes Centre. The diversity of views generated a thorough discussion from the floor, on co-existence, consumer choice and the particularly contentious the issue of liability for contamination.

A clear benefit of the day was the diversity of the audience and speakers allowing a range of opinions to be expressed and challenged. The conference succeeded in starting to unravel the complex issues facing the UK this year whether participants interest was in food, farming, environment or place in the global market. The presentations will shortly be available via the Freeze website.



*Presentation by Environment Minister Michael Meacher*

### R.I.P. Dolly

Traditionally the 14th of February is the day of love. However, for poor Dolly, the first genetically engineered sheep, Valentines cards were the last thing on her mind, as the grim reaper was the only one knocking on her door that morning. As the first successfully cloned mammal, Dolly ignited controversy back in 1997. Last year it was revealed that she had premature arthritis, and she was put down this February as she had developed lung cancer. It is usual for sheep to live twice as long as this so her untimely death has left questions about animal cloning.

### 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, 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 Food, Planet 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, Vetwork UK, Vincermos 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 50 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.

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# The GM Public Debate finally takes shape

After an uncertain few months over Christmas and New Year, while issues of timing and funding were resolved, things are at last moving forward for the much awaited Public Debate on GM

At the end of January Margaret Beckett responded to the Public Debate Steering Board's (PDSB) request for more funds, allocating £155K more. However at the same time a letter sent from the Welsh Assembly, echoed by both Scotland and Northern Ireland, expressed a desire that the public programme of debate should start after the elections in the devolved administrations (1 May) and should include the publication of the results of the Farm-Scale Evaluations, expected in July. Since the Government has from the outset insisted on the Public Debate reporting in June, thereby avoiding inclusion of the FSE results, this obviously represented a bit of a rift between Government and the devolved administrations (DAs).

At the same time the PDSB wrote again to Mrs Beckett saying that due to loss of time the timetable needed revising, to follow the same dates suggested by the DAs, and deliver a report in September. The PDSB have now received confirmation from Mrs Beckett of the revised timetable - with the addition of further funding from the DAs given that the timetable now satisfies their requirements. The total budget for the whole Debate is now £500K - twice the original figure allocated.

## Proposed Plans

The Central Office of Information has now come up with a set of proposals as follows:

- The production of a 'tool-kit'. It is expected that it will consist of a video, a CD-rom, and a paper version of the creative content of the first two. This will form the basis of three 'tiers' of public meetings:
- The first tier will be six regional meetings in early May across the UK. These meetings will launch the process and the 'toolkit', as well as offer the opportunity for deliberative interaction between members of the public and 'experts'
- The second tier will be large 'local' meetings run by county councils etc.

Facilitation support will be offered and these will follow the deliberative process created by the 'tool-kit'. These meetings will be dependent on take-up by councils - therefore how many and where they might take place can not be guaranteed. Already Norfolk, Shropshire, Leicestershire and Warwickshire have expressed interest in hosting such meetings

- The third tier of meetings will be grassroots events run by local networks, for example trade unions, universities, schools etc. The toolkit once again will enable groups to run a deliberative event - something novel and different from the 'standard' public meeting concept. The number of meetings will be dependent on take-up by groups across the country
- For those people unable to attend any of the above meetings, an interactive version will be available via the website and a paper version for those unable to access the internet
- There will be a feedback mechanism for all of the above elements of the process to allow for capture and analysis of participants views
- There will also be ten 'reconvened' workshops, to mirror the Corr Willbourn workshops run before Christmas. The participants will be selected in order to ensure that grassroots opinions are captured in a deliberative process.

## Timing

The debate will be launched in April, and events will start in May in England and a bit later in the DAs, and will run through to July. The report will be written up over the summer and intended to be delivered at the end of September.

### ... stop press ...

**At the time of writing the Royal Society, who are publishing the results of the Farm Scale Trials, have said that they are unlikely to do this until September, despite the Government having said for the last year that they will be available in July. This will therefore have repercussions on the timetable for the debate.**

### action...action...action

**How can you engage in the debate process? Following the above proposals, there are several ways to get involved:**

- **Go along to a regional meeting.**  
These will be announced when the debate is launched in April
- **Encourage your local council - either City, District or County, to run a large scale meeting, and go along**
- **Take up the 'toolkit' and organise your own event in your community**
- **Log on to the website (when up and running in May) and participate in the interactive component**
- **Request a paper version**

**If you require more information on any of the above please email [aebc@dti.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:aebc@dti.gsi.gov.uk) or telephone 0207 215 6508 or see the website [www.gmpublicdebate.org.uk](http://www.gmpublicdebate.org.uk)**

## Materials to be used in the debate

The materials that will be produced to underpin the debate i.e. for use in a video or CD-rom, are currently the subject of a convoluted process designed to ensure that they are balanced, fair and present all sides of the argument. They are based on the workshops run before Christmas with members of the public (for the report from these see <http://www.gmpublicdebate.org.uk/minutes/docs/corrwillbourn.doc>) which gave rise to many questions, and which also indicated a recognition that what are sometimes presented as 'facts' often aren't and that there are always two or more answers to one question!

The workshops indicated the desire to have information which presented all sides of the issue. Consequently an inclusive process of engagement with key players (including Friends of the Earth, Soil Association and Greenpeace) is taking place and it is hoped it will end up with materials which adequately express the many differing views held on this issue. Although this process is a difficult one - and novel - fingers crossed the outcome is worth it.

# The Food Standards Agency GM Public Debacle

In our last newsletter we reported on the FSA's intentions for a public debate of their own, separate from the AEBC initiated Public Debate. The FSA's role in the Public Debate initially was to be an advisor to the GM Science review. They are now planning a series of events fulfilling the same objectives as the Government initiated Public Debate, but without the same understanding of the need to have the public frame the issues for debate and to ensure that the process gives the opportunity to fully deliberate the complex issues involved in GM. There is potential for confusion between the different events, and for those run by the FSA to undermine the events planned by the Public Debate Steering Board.

On the 15th of February, the news was dominated by the anti-war march, swamping the FSA announcement of its activities planned which include;

- A UK schools debating competition to debate the motion 'This house would eat genetically modified foods'. The final team event will take place at Durham University.
- A group of 14-15 year olds from North London will produce a video about GM foods.
- One day events in Scotland are being organised with the Scottish Civic Forum to discuss consumer choice and acceptability of GM foods.
- A citizens jury will be asking "Should GM food be available to buy in the UK?" taking place in Slough, 3-7th April.
- The FSA have produced a booklet to accompany their work titled 'GM Food opening up the debate'.

The content of the FSA booklet is of great concern as it introduces the issue of genetic modification using terms such as 'accurate' and 'precise', which are highly contestable and the description of GM being an extension of traditional breeding methods which is also internationally controversial. The booklet does not address key factors such as the role of companies, global trade, the impact on the food chain and intellectual property rights. It also reinforces a biased view of GM by not including the Starlink incident, seed contamination occurrences or cross contamination of crops.

The PDSB is striving to create a public debate on a limited budget to carry out a thorough process, currently going through a rigorous process of developing supporting literature in order to incorporate a wide range of views. It is disappointing to see the FSA subsequently announcing a variety of costly activities and biased supporting material. The activities of the FSA have developed a very unsatisfactory situation and could be potentially damaging to the overall GM debate in the UK. Freeze supporters are expressing their concerns about the booklet material and the role of the FSA in writing to the FSA Board and the PDSB.

You can find out more information on the FSA activities planned for March and April via its website:  
[www.food.gov.uk/gmdebate](http://www.food.gov.uk/gmdebate)

## action...action...action

**Write to Sir John Krebs and Malcolm Grant (PDSB Chair) expressing your concerns.**

● **John Krebs, Food Standards Agency, 125 Kingsway, London WC2B 6NH** ● **Malcolm Grant, Chair, Public Debate Steering Board, Bay 479, 1 Victoria Street, London SW1 OET.**

## The Science Review

The review of the science of GM, being led by Professor Sir David King (the Government's Chief Scientific Adviser) invites input from the public via open meetings and through the website.

The website is inviting evidence based, peer reviewed contributions on the following five categories:

- GM food and feed safety,
- Gene flow, detection and impact,
- Environmental impact of GM crops,
- Future developments,
- Regulatory process.

Several open meetings have taken place so far and more are taking place during March. However, there has been criticism for these open meetings for the lack of ability to sufficiently address the issues in sufficient depth.

*Here, John Latham, science writer and audience member at the Edinburgh open science meeting gives his views of the process of the meeting.*

Anyone concerned with whether official British Scientific Institutions could effectively orchestrate an open and inclusive debate on the science of GM crops will not have been reassured by the debate held at the Royal Society of Edinburgh in January. The subject in this case was Gene flow: Scale and Consequences for Agriculture and the Environment. The debate can be summarised most aptly by noting that possibly the best comment of all was

made after the event had finished by a farmer who came up to me and said: "How did we manage to get so far along this road when we understand so little?"

The root problem for these debates is that the British Science establishment has little or none of the necessary enthusiasm, skills or incentives to promote or inspire meaningful events. The RSA lacked the ability to find scientists willing to take issue with over-hasty commercialisation, provide papers in advance, and as of the 26th of February, the RSE website contains no apparent recognition that the event ever occurred.

### Future Open Meetings:

For further information email [events@the-ba.net](mailto:events@the-ba.net) or tel: 020 7973 3052

- 'What is the current state of knowledge on the safety of GM animal feed and its implications for animal and human health?' Belfast, Tuesday 11 March 2003, 7 pm-9 pm at the Agriculture and Foods Science Centre, Newforge Lane, Belfast.
- 'Gene flow in agriculture and the environment', Monday 17 March 2003, 3pm - 5pm. at the William Davies Conference Hall, Institute of Grassland and Environmental Research, Plas Gogerddan, Bow Street, Aberystwyth, Ceredigion.

**Future Science Review panel meetings are open to public observers and you are encouraged to go along. See 'Diary' overleaf for details.**

# What's new in the EU?

## Environmental Liability Directive

Industry has been lobbying hard to weaken the current proposals and there are still many loopholes including:

- only around 20% of the EU's biodiversity, and only around 13% of its land area is covered by the draft Directive.
  - exemption for damage to property and public health.
  - economic damage - such as the contamination of organic crops through cross-pollination with genetically modified crops is completely overlooked.
  - exemptions (so called 'permit' and 'state-of-the-art' defences) will mean that industry can effectively avoid liability.
- The proposed Directive would leave farmers and consumers without protection from GMOs.

## Co-existence developemnts

The commission is now developing its strategy to manage co-existence. Several states are pressing for strict rules on cross-contamination between

conventional and GM crops. They are insisting that these rules must be in place before the lifting of the moratorium can be considered.

## Moratorium at an end?

In the last couple of months a spate of new applications for GM cultivation and import, currently 18, have been received in the EU. This has provoked speculation that the existing de facto moratorium in Europe is coming under pressure, unless the member states that have blocked new approvals so far continue to raise objections.

The new approval process however raises an interesting dilemma for the UK Government, as they will be required to vote on these in the coming few months. But with their commitment to listen to the results of the Public debate, and the science and economic reviews, how can the Government make any decisions requiring a clear policy position until these have reported?

## action...action...action

**Write to the Secretary of State, Margaret Beckett, stating that the UK should not be making any decisions on new approvals until completion of the Public Debate and due consideration of the results. This will show the Government's commitment to take public views into consideration when deciding on policy in relation to commercialising GM crops, both at EU level and in the UK. Write to: Margaret Beckett, DEFRA, Nobel House, 17 Smith Square, London, SW1P 3JR.**

## ...diary...

**11 March:** 'GM animal feed: safety implications for the food chain', Belfast, Tel: 0207 973 3052.

**17-19 March** 'Who twists the Helix?' University of Cambridge. [www.twistedhelix.org](http://www.twistedhelix.org) or Tel: Anne Galbreith 0191 241 8614

**17 March:** 'Gene flow in agriculture and the environment', Aberystwyth. Tel:0207 973 3052

**19 March:** Science Review Panel meeting 11.30am to 4pm. 61-65 Gt. Queen Street, London. Tel: 0207 215 2237 to register.

**20 March:** PDSB Steering Board meeting 10.30am - 1.00pm, 1 Gt. George Street, London. Tel: 0207 215 6508.

**29 April:** Science Review Panel meeting 11am to 4pm, 6-9 Carlton House Terrace, London. Tel: 0207 215 2237 to register.

## ...news...

### The Strategy Unit's Economics Review

The work of the Governments Strategy Unit looking at the costs and benefits of GM crops continues. The initial scoping note put out in the autumn to launch their work provoked a great deal of responses. Many were critical of the methodology underpinning the work, the over-emphasis given to benefits at the expense of risks, and flagging up the difficulty, but nevertheless the need to take into consideration uncertainties and the unexpected.

Currently the Strategy Unit has further papers for comment, an overview of the methodology and four papers looking at the various workstreams that have been set up - environment and human health, developing countries, the product chain and science and industry. These papers build on the comments received in relation to the original scoping note and are much improved as a result. These papers are available for comment at [www.strategy.gov.uk/2002/GM/summ.shtml](http://www.strategy.gov.uk/2002/GM/summ.shtml)

The deadline for input on these papers was the end of February although they have said that they will still consider comments received after this date.

### South Hams goes GM-Free

South Hams District Council, Devon, has declared itself a GM-free zone, refusing to allow genetically modified crops to be grown in the District. The district will be writing to the Government to demand protection for its GM-free status under European law. The EU directive under which this is possible allows the Commission to exempt areas from the growing of any particular GM crops if there are good reasons for doing so.

### Two new reports from the Brooms Barn

(See [www.rothamsted.bbsrc.ac.uk/broom/gm\\_work.html](http://www.rothamsted.bbsrc.ac.uk/broom/gm_work.html)) on research into GM sugar beet have reported favourable results for both wildlife and farmers. However, the former research, sponsored by Monsanto, has been criticised for its limitations, and the latter, which says that GM sugar beet will be the saviour of UK sugar beet farmers, has been dismissed by the UK sugar industry which points out there is no market for it.

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.

Please make cheques payable to 'The Five Year Freeze'

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