

Thin Ice



the GM Freeze Campaign newsletter

Issue 3, May/June 2006

Victory on Terminator!

In the Jan/Feb issue of Thin Ice we reported on the threat of the global *de facto* moratorium on Terminator Technology (TT) being overturned at meetings of the UN Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) in Curitiba, Brazil in March. TT is used to genetically modify plants that produce sterile seeds.

We asked you to help prevent this happening by putting public pressure on the UK Government – and it worked. Your efforts added to global protests about TT that led to a victory for farmers and social and environmental groups.

The run-up to Curitiba

In meetings of the parties to the CBD in Granada, Spain in January, delegates from pro-GM Canada, Australia and New Zealand lead attempts to open the door to field testing of TT by negotiating a clause to overturn the general *de facto* moratorium agreed in 2000 by allowing applications for TT seeds to be assessed on a case-by-case basis instead. This approach would miss the cumulative impact of TT seeds over time in the same way that assessing the impact of a new house would fail to show the overall impact of the whole estate. The issue was next to be debated and decided at the 8th Conference of the Parties in Brazil in March.

The UK Campaigning Group on Terminator Technology, which includes GM Freeze, worked to increase public pressure on politicians not to cave in to lobbying from pro-biotech countries. Throughout February and March 113,000 leaflets detailing the threat to the moratorium were distributed by in the UK and many people took action. As a result, over 230 MPs have signed Early Day Motion (EDM) 1300 calling on the

Government to support the moratorium. Not many EDMs collect 200 signatures, so this is an indication of the strength of feeling about Terminator.

On 14th February a briefing for MPs was held in Parliament to raise awareness of TT. A powerful open letter from African civil society organisations was also published asking for movement towards a ban on TT to protect their livelihoods and environment.

On 21st February, the UK Department for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) published their position statement on Terminator which appeared to have changed from supporting the *de facto* moratorium, to supporting the case-by-case assessment. This would mean that GM seeds containing TT genes would be assessed like any other GM seed and the novel threats to food security and the environment would not be considered.

Anthony Steen, MP held an a debate in Parliament on 8th March and challenged the government on their apparent change of policy. Under Secretary of State Ben Bradshaw tired to defend the government by arguing that they had always supported the case-by-case option. However, in an article in The Guardian on March 15th, Michael Meacher, who was the Minister who negotiated the agreement on the *de facto* moratorium in 2000, accused DEFRA of retrospectively reinterpreting the CBD decision and undermining the international agreement.

In Curitiba

Thousands of representatives of farming, environmental and social groups, including members of the GM Freeze Management Committee, were in



The Governor of the Brazilian state of Parana wears a Ban Terminator sticker after a blistering speech in Curitiba attacking the technology.

Curitiba to observe the official negotiations and to make their views on TT heard.

As expected, negotiators from Canada, Australia and New Zealand worked to undermine the moratorium. After a long impasse in the negotiations, a new text was proposed that no longer included the case-by-case language and reverted to the pre-Granada text. The new text reaffirmed the international moratorium and the need for assessments on the impacts of TT before field trials can even be considered.

This is a significant victory that has highlighted and reinforced opposition to Terminator Technology around the world. The UK Campaigning Group on Terminator will be meeting again in May to consider what can be done to make sure that this technology is banned for good.

■ Turn to the back page for a first-hand account of the negotiating shenanigans in Curitiba.

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'Organic' must mean GM-Free

As reported in our last edition, in December 2005 the European Commission announced their intention of imposing a 0.9% GM threshold on organic produce.

If agreed this means that organic produce could contain up to 0.9% GM and still be labelled organic providing the presence is 'adventitious' or technically unavoidable. This is the same threshold applied to non-GM products before they have to be labelled GM.

Thus at the stroke of a pen the Commission would remove the distinction between organic and non-organic products from a GM perspective. This is very unfortunate given that the presence of GM in non-organic food was an important reason why many people started buying organic products in the late 1990s.

GM contamination of organic produce can occur at any stage of the food chain from seed contamination, cross pollination in the field, and residues in seed drills, harvesters, silos, ships and lorries.

The EC has refused to adopt stringent measures to protect organic crops from

contamination. They realise that the very nature of GM crops makes it impossible to prevent contamination occurring. Given this it seems inevitable that the 0.9% threshold would eventually have to be raised to accommodate more and more contamination.

The EC proposal is designed to allow GM and non-GM and organic crops to coexist in Europe, thus allowing large scale GM cultivation to go ahead. A recent Greenpeace report on the GM maize belt of southern Spain shows how GM contamination has already crept above the 0.9% threshold in some crops. One organic maize crop was found to contain 12.6% GM by Greenpeace.*

As Spain is the EC's only example of coexistence in practice then the future for organic crops looks bleak – the proposal for a 0.9% threshold represents the thin end of a sizeable GM wedge.

The best hope is for European organic consumers and farmers to unite and lobby their government, MPs and MEPs to reject the EC's charter for contamination and opt for no GM presence in non-GM and organic crops. If this means that GM crops cannot be

grown in Europe then so be it. There still has to be a proper debate in Europe on whether or not we want GM crops cultivated and what alternatives exist.

* *Impossible Coexistence*, Greenpeace, April 2006

Get active

Alan Simpson MP has sponsored an Early Day Motion in Parliament (EDM 1599) that has been signed by 184 MPs so far. The EDM notes public concerns about GM in organic food and calls on the government to oppose the 0.9% threshold and ensure that organic means no GMOs. Please write to your MP and ask them to sign EDM 1599. You can find out who your MP is at: www.locata.co.uk/commons/ or by calling 020 7219 4272.

To see if your MP has already signed go to: <http://edmi.parliament.uk/EDMi>

'GM-free zones' in India

Rachel Dechenne has worked as a researcher with Vandana Shiva in India and is currently undertaking an MSc in Public Health and Food Policy, as well as volunteering at GM Freeze. Here she reports on a recent visit to India.

On 22nd and 23rd March, Dr. Vandana Shiva, leading environmentalist and Director of Navdanya, invited me to India to share evidence and concerns about the corporate-led attacks on people's food choices around the world. These two meetings on 'Food Safety and Food Rights: Emerging Challenges to Health, Nutrition and Farmers Livelihood', provided a common platform to forge a new alliance between people active in the field of organic farming, health and nutrition.

"Food choices are about democracy, ethics and culture; not just about risk and safety", argued Dr. Shiva. In India, where more than 40,000 farmers have committed suicide due to the high costs

of farming with hybrid and GM cotton, these are not empty words. An extremely rich biodiversity, developed through millennia to provide a large variety of nutritious food, is being eroded in India. This plethora of healthy food, perfectly adapted to people and their environment, is being replaced by hazardous GMOs and Western-type 'junk food'.

The fight against GMOs is becoming a symbol of people's resistance against the usurpation of their food sovereignty. By resisting GMOs Indians defend their fundamental rights to adequate food and health, and thus their freedom of choice.

At this meeting it was decided to launch a '10 year Action Plan', including a movement for GM-free villages, to defend India's food and farming from the threat of GMOs, processed and 'junk foods'.

■ For further info: www.navdanya.org

Events

The London premiere of the GM exposé film *The Future of Food*, organised by the Guild of Food Writers with the Soil Association, is on Thursday June 22. The afternoon screening at the French Institute, South Kensington, will be followed by a Q and A session with the director Deborah Koons Garcia, chaired by Craig Sams, founder of Green & Black's, and followed by organic finger food and a chance to network.

Tickets are £10-£5. For more details contact ewinkler@soilassociation.org or call 0117 929 0661

For more information about the film see www.thefutureoffood.com

Apologies

Please accept our apologies for the lack of a newsletter in March/ April – as you will see from this edition, it's been a busy few months!

WTO – report reveals U.S. spin

On 7th February, after delays of over 18 months, the World Trade Organization (WTO) dispute panel sent its interim ruling report to the parties in the complaint. The report is meant to remain confidential, but it was leaked to Friends of the Earth who published it on their website.

The dispute was launched against the European Union in May 2003 by the US, Canada and Argentina who argued that Europe's five year de facto moratorium on the approval of new GM crops was an illegal barrier to trade. The dispute was also widely seen as a bullying tactic by the US to warn other countries not to take time putting stringent regulations on GMOs in place, unless they also wanted to be taken to the WTO.

At first the US claimed in the media that it had won the case and that Europe had lost. However, once the report was made public it became clear that this was not entirely the case as the findings are complex and very specific, focussing purely on whether the EU followed correct procedures under WTO rules.

The main findings of the panel are outlined below:

- Europe did have a moratorium on the approval of GM crops between June 1998 and August 2003 that violated WTO trade rules by leading to 'undue delay' in assessing new marketing applications for GMOs. As the approvals process has started again, no action needs to be taken.

- The specific Member State bans introduced on some GM crops by several countries violated WTO rules because they were not based on satisfactory risk assessments, according to WTO requirements. As the national bans are still in place, steps should be taken to bring them in to conformity with WTO rules.

The panel did not rule on some very significant issues, such as whether GM products in general are safe or the right of countries to establish their own level of acceptable risk, including zero risk.

The parties have 60 days to comment on the report before the final version is produced. The parties then have to decide whether to appeal the ruling or not.

According to the ruling, the EU has escaped a fine, but does need to overturn the remaining national bans. Some countries have already signified their unwillingness to do this and just this week Poland announced a ban on all GM seeds. The European Commission will face a public and unpopular battle to try to make some countries comply.

It is undoubtedly damaging that the US was presented in the media as having won the case, and they will no doubt be using this as a potential threat to other countries who want a cautious approach to GM.

However, the fact is that the ruling will do nothing to restore a market for GM food that didn't exist in the first place.

Double standards of the EC revealed

Another document which was released after the interim judgement was the EC's submission to WTO dispute panel. This sought to justify the EC's position on GM food and crops by highlighting the scientific uncertainty around their potential impacts, for instance:

"on the basis of existing research...it is impossible to know whether the introduction of GM food has had any human health effects other than acute toxic reactions".

European Communities submission to the World Trade Organisation dispute panel, 28 January 2005.

This document only serves to highlight the hypocrisy behind the EC's decisions to approve all GM crop imports applications in the past two years despite the failure of member states to reach the required qualified majority in the Council of Ministers. In all these cases the EC have ignored concerns about safety and ignored the uncertainties they were happy to raise before the WTO.

- Thanks to Dr Sue Mayer of GeneWatch UK and Alice Palmer of FIELD for their help interpreting the 1000 page report which you can read at www.gmfreeze.org

Get active

European Parliament - written declaration on GM foods

Caroline Lucas, Green MEP, has tabled a written declaration on GM foods, which she has brought before the European Parliament. A written declaration is similar to an Early Day Motion in the House of Commons and, if a majority of MEPs sign up to support the declaration within 3 months of its publication, it becomes European Parliament policy. Among other things, this declaration asserts that every country and region has the right to completely prohibit the

import, cultivation, and sale of genetically modified organisms.

Please ask your local MEPs to sign the declaration. It needs to attract at least 367 signatures between March and June 13th of this year, otherwise it lapses.

Details of all the regional MEPs are at: www.europarl.org.uk/news/NWSupcominmain.htm or by phoning us on 020 7837 0642. When lobbying MEPs please give them the reference number for the written declaration which is 14/2006, and remind them that it lapses on June 13th.

Bye bye Mrs Beckett

In Tony Blair's latest cabinet re-shuffle, Margaret Beckett has been replaced by David Miliband as Secretary for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs.

Whereas Mrs Beckett is the Labour Party's Great Survivor and has been a loyal servant to Mr Blair, David Miliband is a 37 year-old left-wing intellectual, previously head of the No 10 Policy Unit and School's Minister.

The question is whether he will be willing to engage with us in discussions about GM, or whether he will continue to toe Tony's line.

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Negotiations, threats and inducements

Have you ever wondered how vital international negotiations are conducted? Helena Paul, Chair of GM Freeze, was in Curitiba and reveals all.

I arrived in Brazil at the meeting of the Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) in the middle of the first week, during discussions on the labelling of GMOs. The ExPo Trade Centre on the outskirts of Curitiba is a grey concrete box. In the main meeting rooms, governments sit at the front, then 'take the floor' one after the other to put their points or agree or disagree with the points of other governments while the NGOs and indigenous peoples listen at the back. Many issues have to be covered in a short time. The perennial problem is that the rich countries have many delegates and the poor and small ones very few, who have to cover all the issues. Although the US is not a signatory to the Convention, it brings big delegations and manipulates behind the scenes, working with a pro-GM group of member countries, notably Canada, New Zealand and

Australia. At times, these countries appear to have their fingers in every pie.

There's a strong whiff of 'pork bellies' about the process, which is all about trading, with extra layers of threat and inducement arising from actual trade negotiations and other interests countries may have outside the CBD arena. Through these shark-infested seas, delegates must steer their course. Those who have been part of this process since the beginning can read signs that are invisible to novices like me.

At first it all seems overwhelming, hard to see how to contribute anything useful. I spent the first week observing the drama – yes it really was quite dramatic at times – that unfolded around the unlikely subject of labelling, as countries blocked and shifted and went into haggling huddles in corners. Terminator followed and I helped the team with printing information, keeping the piles in different languages stocked up, putting up posters and selling tee-shirts. In the

plenaries, I sat with the old hands and tried to learn from them how the process operates, while they did their exceedingly effective work that ended with a better result than we ever dared to hope.

In the final week, a small group worked on GE trees and we novices had to apply whatever we might have learned in the first two weeks. Any squeamishness about lobbying had to be cast to the winds. There were moments when I felt a bit like a cold-caller, trying to stop government delegates in the corridor about GE trees. The basic rules of the game are simple: ensure that delegates are informed about the issues and know what is happening, listen to what governments say, try and get allies to speak out and support each other, and remember that one very small country with determination can stand up to the US, the EU, Canada, Australia and their puppets. Because I believe this is how, in the end, we achieved a pretty good result on GE trees.

GM-free beacons light up the skies

On 8th April as part of the first international GM global day of action, local campaigners organised over 30 beacons to be lit on some of the highest points around the country. The aim was

to highlight the fact that the UK wants to be a GM-free country in a GM-free Europe in a GM-free world.

The result was a huge variety of clever and imaginative beacons and some great

socialising, so much so that there is talk of doing it all again next year. Oh, and everyone managed not to set fire to the surrounding countryside, which was a huge relief...

■ **Footnote: For the second year in a row there are no outdoor GM crop trials taking place in the UK in Spring/Summer.**

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The GM Freeze campaign is calling on the Government 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

