

Thin Ice



the GM Freeze Campaign newsletter

Issue 8, July 07

India - harnessing the law

GM is not having an easy time of it in India. A study released in February by Washington University found that the rapid changes brought by GM has helped cause a "complete breakdown" of cotton farming systems in India, undermining some of biotech industry's favourite arguments about the potential benefits of GM agriculture for poor farmers.

The study was conducted in Andhra Pradesh, where some shepherds are also reporting unusual illness and death of animals grazed on Bt cotton stubble for the third year running. This prompted the Animal Husbandry Department to ask the Agriculture Ministry to stop the sale of Bt cotton seed. The Agriculture Department issued an advisory to farmers against grazing their animals in Bt cotton fields and launched an independent study to properly establish the cause of the problem.

The Government of Andhra Pradesh also refused demands by seed companies to raise the price of cotton seed after it was brought down last year.

Field trials were halted by order of the Supreme Court last October as a result of a far-reaching Public Interest Litigation (PIL) case brought in September. The case includes demands on toxicity analysis and

information; conflict of interest; safety testing protocols; a comprehensive list of GM field trials locations and GM sequences; a systematic plan in the public domain for comprehensive, nationwide testing for contamination of fields and food from both Bt cotton and food field trials; the instatement of an Ombudsman to oversee GM biosafety and GM policy, and a ban on releasing any GMO until the Ombudsman is satisfied it is appropriate to do so. The petitioners say they want to address "the laxness that prevails internationally, and in India, in current health safety testing...and the degree of rigour and transparency that is required to ensure...that the public are not guinea pigs in the experiment with GM crops."

In April the Central Information Commission (CIC) ordered the Department

of Biotechnology to disclose toxicity and allergenicity data on all GM food crops being field tested, overturning Government protests of commercial confidence.

In May the biotech industry appealed the ban on field trials. A spokesperson for the All India Crop Biotechnology Association said, "There is no other option before the country but to adopt transgenic technology in agriculture."

The court permitted ongoing field trials to continue, but granted permission for new trials only under strict conditions including an increase in the isolation distance to 200 metres and securing prior consent of local authorities, and a named scientist responsible for compliance with all the conditions "in order to pin down any mishaps". Aruna Rodrigues, who launched the PIL, pointed out that, "It will be virtually impossible...to carry out field trials, given our small landholdings, with isolation distances of 200m."

The PIL case continues, and looks set to be an important test case on commercial secrecy, Government complicity and the public's right to know.

Get active

"Organic" food, now with 0.9% GM contamination?

On 12 June the European Union Council of Agriculture Ministers disregarded the decision of the European Parliament and voted that as of January 2009 Europe will operate a 0.9% threshold for GMO contamination of organic food. The European Commission says the new rules "simplify" requirements in the organic sector.

Under the new regulation food containing up to 0.9% GMOs can be labelled organic if the presence is "adventitious or technically unavoidable" – ie, wholly accidental after genuine attempts to prevent contamination. However the European Parliament voted in March to set the threshold at the lowest level possible – currently 0.1%. Sadly the UK Government yet again voted in favour of GM.

The new regime will put renewed pressure on internal and cross-border

inspection, detection, coexistence and enforcement measures to ensure a genuinely GM-free choice for consumers and farmers. Yet the details have yet to be worked out, and existing measures have enabled a string of contamination incidents – including with experimental pharmaceuticals.

The Conservative Party has called for labelling on any GM contamination over 0.1%, including for animal feed. GM Freeze urges you to write to David Cameron to ask him how he will help achieve this. You can post questions and comments directly to Mr Cameron on [webcameron.org.uk/wsc.php?mod=register](http://www.webcameron.org.uk/wsc.php?mod=register) or you can write to him at Rt Hon David Cameron MP, Leader of Her Majesty's Official Opposition, House of Commons, Westminster, London SW1A 0AA.

Turning the tide?

This edition of *Thin Ice* brings you a bumper summer crop of stories about people successfully holding back the GM tide around the world. From Cyprus to South Korea, Venezuela to Zambia, GM food and crops are finding it increasingly difficult to gain headway unchallenged. Adding these advances to our momentum starts with sharing the stories. We hope you find them inspiring. As always, if you'd like more information or references for any of the items, please get in touch.

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GM hits legal

Austria, Germany, Luxembourg, Greece and France all have ongoing bans on GM food, despite pressure from the unelected EU Commission to drop them, and there are still at least 174 regions and over 4,500 local governments that have declared themselves to be GM-free zones – including Wales and the Highlands of Scotland. The 2005 Swiss referendum result banned GM crops, and Poland banned GM seed. Below is an update on other restrictions on GMOs from around the world.

Greece

In April the Government banned the import of another 16 types of GM hybrid corn, bringing the total number of GM types banned to 51. In June the Government extended the ban on Monsanto's GM corn for another two years. The Deputy Agriculture Minister said, "The Ministry strongly opposes the circulation of GMOs. Our target is to produce quality products, and under no circumstances do modified products qualify as such." EU Trade Commissioner Peter Mandelson warned that such moves could bring WTO action against the EU, but the Greek Government persists, and every one of the country's 54 prefectures has declared itself a GM-free zone.

Germany

In May the Government imposed stricter regulations on the sale of Monsanto's GM MON810 corn seed citing new information that "gives reasons to suppose that the cultivation of MON810 poses a danger to the environment". Any sale of MON810 must be accompanied by a monitoring plan provided by Monsanto. A spokesperson for the Brandenburg state Ministry of Agriculture commented, "This amounts to a *de facto* ban on the cultivation of genetically modified corn," since no such plans have been produced, and the ruling could even prevent standing crops being harvested.

France

Following Germany's *de facto* ban on GM corn, a French newspaper reported the new Environment Minister Alain Juppe said, "In this particular instance, we must be steered by the German case...They have just discovered that the toxin which is supposed to kill the corn pest is being secreted in ways that are not precisely what was expected." It was also reported that the Minister said the wider question of GM crops in France will be addressed at a national review of environment policies in October.

Cyprus

In May the Parliament rejected President's attempt to revise the law prohibiting the import, cultivation or use of GM bio-fuels. The country faces sanctions after the European Commission sent a formal letter warning the move breaches rules on the free movement of goods. A spokesperson for the Environment Committee President explained that the MPs want Cyprus to be declared a GM-free territory and "didn't want to make an exception in this case".

Then in June Parliament unanimously passed legislation requiring supermarkets to put GM products on separate shelves from other food.

US

In May a Federal Judge made permanent a temporary ban on GM alfalfa, ruling that the Government failed to study adequately the crop's potential to mix with organic and conventional varieties. The first such ban on an approved crop requires the USDA not only to prevent any further planting country wide until it conducts a full environmental impact statement on the crop, but also to publish "as soon as practicable" (certainly within 30 days) all existing crop locations to enable testing for contamination. The Judge noted that contamination has already occurred, calling it an "irreparable environmental harm".

Canada

In May a bill to prohibit field testing and commercialisation of Terminator seed technology was introduced in Parliament. A spokesperson for the National Farmers Union in Canada said, "Canada needs to pass this bill into law because genetic seed sterilisation is dangerous and blatantly anti-farmer - suicide seeds threaten to intensify corporate control over Canadian agriculture and offer no benefits for farmers."

Brazil

In June a Federal Judge banned Bayer's GM corn (a mere month after it was approved for retail sale) and ordered the official biosafety agency not to approve new varieties in its meeting where Monsanto and Syngenta each had GM corn up for commercial approval.

India

The Government of Orissa announced in June that it will not permit field trials of GM brinjal (eggplant) in order to protect some 226 native varieties. Promoting organic crops, the Agriculture Minister said, "We are not for any GM crop, let alone Bt Brinjal. There is no credible scientific study to stand by the GM crops. Nor are there reports from any where in the country about farmers welcoming it."

Zambia

In April a bill was submitted to Parliament for a new National Biosafety Authority under a new Scientific Advisory Committee, as well as a regulatory framework to deal with GM research, development, application, import, export, transit and use. Crucially the bill also sets up a liability mechanism to redress any harm or damage caused by any GM product. The Minister of Justice said the Government is eager to have the bill passed into law to allow for the domestication of the Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety, in order to prevent the country becoming a "dumping ground" for GMOs. The Chair of the Education,

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Science and Technology Committee said, "The bill is aimed at ensuring that Zambia remains a GMO free country," joining Lesotho, Malawi, Mozambique and Swaziland.

Philippines

In April Negros Occidental province, would be "organic food bowl of Asia", passed landmark legislation banning the import, planting, cultivation, sale or trade of living GM plants and animals. The move further develops a 2005 agreement between the Governor and his neighboring counterpart to ban GMOs and to commit 10% (some 80,000 hectares) of Negros Island's agriculture to organic by 2010.

The new ordinance requires seizure and destruction of any GMOs found and sets fines of up to 5,000 pesos and/or one year imprisonment for violations, including direct liability for heads of corporations. Anyone already growing GMOs has 120 days to stop and dispose of the crops outside of the province. Those selling and trading in GMOs have 30 days to dispose of stocks outside the province.

Venezuela

In June President Hugo Chavez announced a ban on cultivating GM crops in the country, establishing what may well be the most sweeping restrictions on the technology in the western hemisphere. The move includes cancelling a deal with Monsanto to grow up to 500,000 acres of GM soya. Chavez said, "This project is terminated."

Lithuania

In April the Government rejected a German company's application to grow GM rapeseed. They rejected a similar request to grow GM potatoes last year. The Environment Ministry said it took public opinion into account in making the decisions – some 63% of the public reject GM agriculture.



Welcome to the GM free commune of Villarbeney Fribourg, Switzerland

European update

EU Patent Office (EPO) In May Monsanto's mind boggling patent on all GM plants, including 90% of the world's soya – one of the widest patents ever granted – was revoked after a 13 year legal challenge on the grounds that parts of the patent were not new and others were not described sufficiently to enable others to repeat the "invention" claimed (two fundamental requirements of patentability). The patent was challenged by a number of NGOs and several companies whose own products were threatened by the scope of Monsanto's claims. Bizarrely, even Monsanto opposed the patent when the action began, but has since bought the company that owns it and changed tack to defend it.

EU Food Safety Authority (EFSA)

In our last edition we reported on an independent review of the safety data Monsanto submitted to support the marketing application for their GM maize Mon863. EFSA's GMO committee recently rejected this peer reviewed critique by the Committee for Independent Research and Genetic Engineering (CRIIGEN) at the University of Caen in France.

CRIIGEN's statistical analysis was criticised by EFSA, saying, "Observed statistically significant differences reported by Monsanto, CRIIGEN and EFSA, were considered not to be biologically relevant." EFSA concluded that the CRIIGEN paper "does not present a sound scientific

justification in order to question the safety of MON 863 maize".

In their response, CRIIGEN condemn EFSA for allowing important data on blood, urine, organs and weight analyses for rats eating the commercialized GMO to be kept "commercially secret" rather than shared with other scientists wanting to assess the impact of Mon863 on mammalian physiology. They say EFSA's acceptance of just one data set from rats, when pesticide and drug approvals require data from three species, is unacceptable. CRIIGEN say EFSA revealed a "lack of questioning of Monsanto tests".

CRIIGEN point to 40 significant differences on physiological parameters between rats eating GMOs and their controls. Yet EFSA say this is chance, not adverse impacts of the GMO, which CRIIGEN say is a "significant departure from scientific principles".

CRIIGEN's response was an unequivocal condemnation of the EFSA approach: "In conclusion, we appeal to the scientific community, government authorities and the public to question the EFSA scientific methodology in this case. Our recent paper stands as robust testimony to the questionable safety of this genetically modified food for humans and animals".

EFSA's assessments of applications for GM food and feed give an overriding impression of "rubber stamping" and a lack of proper scrutiny. The European Union member states need to force though major reforms

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of EFSA if the GMO safety assessments are ever to gain public confidence.

UK Pulling out of the Yorkshire GM potato trials, a BASF statement said, "Due to concerns raised by local borage growers, BASF is not going ahead with planting of the field trial this year in order to resolve the issues." (see Issue 7, Thin Ice). The farmer on whose land the trial would run reportedly wants the concerns of three major local borage growers, and hence the beekeepers, to be resolved before he agrees to the planting. However BASF's withdrawal appears to signal that it was not possible to address these concerns. The failure of Defra's coexistence consultation last year to include a statutory requirement for GM farmers to inform beekeepers may hint at difficulties to come.

The second BASF field trial of GM potatoes was planted in Cambridge in April, but the crop was destroyed by activists in July on the grounds that the potatoes were "spreading genetic contagion into the surrounding countryside".

Meanwhile, Sainsbury's have launched Farm Promise milk in 400 stores to replace their line of GM free milk, saying it meets the same quality criteria as GM free milk. This welcome move proves it is possible to source GM-free dairy feed and that milk can be traced back to the producing herd to verify their diet.

The scheme is simple: customers pay an extra 8p per two pint container of semi skimmed, 5p of which is "donated" to support farmers in conversion to organic production. The scheme costs 11p to run and Sainsbury's are making up the 3p difference. While this is good for the farmers in the scheme, other milk producers continue to struggle with low milk prices, and still buy GM feed. The bulk of Sainsbury's ten other types of milk, if not certified organic, are still very likely to come from herds fed on GM soya meal or maize gluten.

GM Freeze has been pressing many of the UK's major food companies to place long-term orders for non-GM soya, a premium essential to provide a strong incentive for farmers to keep growing it. The impact of a GM free diet for cows on retail milk prices is very small, so it's affordable by supermarkets and customers.

Buying GM free milk is the best way to support a continuing move away from GM animal feed. Other companies need to follow Sainsbury's lead.

Russia In June Moscow introduced a voluntary label to identify GM-free foods. Products can display Moscow's GM-free label for a year if producers pass an official inspection. If the label is a success, other countries could follow Moscow's lead, making it an important test case.

Multinational food companies remain sceptical, especially of any added costs. However, Moscow supermarkets have hinted they will only stock products with the GM-free label, and signals from the authorities suggest the label will effectively be obligatory.

Asian update

South Korea In March the Government expanded current identification rules to require all GM products to be labelled. The move, aimed to protect the environment and enhance consumer rights, includes a reward of up to US\$2,130 for whistleblowers reporting mislabelling. Those found guilty of breaching labelling requirements face fines of US\$106,000 or up to seven years in prison.

Philippines In March Agriculture Secretary told a Manila Times journalist he has ordered the Bureau of Plant Industry to withdraw its approval for Monsanto's maize MON863 saying, "There are other, less controversial seeds in the market." There are reports that pressure is being applied to reverse the decision.

Malaysia In April trade talks stalled as the Government pushed ahead with new biosafety laws against the wishes of the US. Malaysia's rice farmers, Consumers' Association and opposition party all back the Government's drive for mandatory labelling, although some are motivated to boost domestic biotech industry.

Debate insisted that the Government not "push aside" health and environment concerns "for the benefit of foreign companies", as well as reiterating that labels are WTO consistent and the US has trade deals with other countries requiring GM labelling. The Natural Resource and Environment Minister said, "We will not allow our population to consume without being able to assess what they can or cannot take as food or medicine," an important consideration in a Muslim country with several other large religious groups with dietary restrictions.

Americas update

Canada In April nearly 200 tons of pharma safflower seed was stranded at a Chilean port when the Federal Government refused to issue the required import permit. Import authorities point out that, "Just by definition, drugs are harmful to humans and animals unless they're administered in a controlled fashion," and ask how the biotech company intends to transport and process the seed "without spilling a drop".

US In May campaigners submitted some 130,000 comments to the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) opposing FDA plans to introduce unlabelled food from cloned animals into the food supply.

The FDA claims it evaluated extensive peer reviewed studies on the safety of food from clones, yet a recent report issued by the Center for Food Safety shows the assessment only references three peer-reviewed food safety studies (funded by the cloning biotech firms), all of which focus on milk from cloned cows. Critics point out that there is already a milk surplus, and that Government support programmes cost over US\$5 billion since 1999.

Stay in touch! If you don't normally receive this bi-monthly newsletter and would like to, please send £5 (to cover costs, made payable to Five Year Freeze) to Five Year Freeze, 94 White Lion Street, London N1 9PF

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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