

Thin Ice



the GM Freeze Campaign newsletter

Issue 11, July 2008

Commission to accept unauthorised GM in food and feed

In May the Commission announced it was looking for a “technical solution” to the presence of unauthorised GM in food and feed imports. In June the Health Commissioner announced a proposal expected on 16 June to permit “very limited” amounts of unauthorised GM in imports, thus ending the zero tolerance policy by accepting “less than 1.0%” contamination of imports with unauthorised GMOs. The UK NFU urged the EC to set an even higher limit.

Importers have long complained about the “difficulty” in segregating out of EU shipments GMOs approved in other countries but not in the EU, leading to rejection of shipments at ports. The proposal would be a “temporary solution” while those GMOs go through the EU approvals process. What will happen if they fail to gain approval after entering the food chain, or why we should rely on systems like those in the US (where there is effectively no safety testing of GMOs), remains to be seen.

Watch this space for action to help prevent this dilution of GM contamination legislation.

China and India demand not driving food crisis

Analysis by independent economist Daryll Ray (Blasingame Chair of Excellence in Agricultural Policy, Institute of Agriculture, and Director of Agricultural Policy Analysis Center, University of Tennessee) dispels the myth that increased meat demand in China and India is driving up global food prices.

China has remained a net *exporter* of all grains since 1996, and while maintaining these exports its grain production exceeded its consumption for each of the last three years. India has also been a net grain *exporter* for 15 of the last 18 years and a net meat *exporter* for the last 18 years. Ray says, “...there is no demand for feed grains from China and India, and none from Indonesia and Brazil as well.”

In fact, in the current environment, rather than driving prices up, Ray argues that China’s increase in soya imports for use as animal feed has sparked a vast increase in the world’s encroachment on the world’s food growing capacity, particularly in Brazil, and is in

fact therefore likely to bring prices down in coming years. While this expansion should obviously not encroach further into the rainforest, China’s and India’s own soya production are on the increase and may ease such pressures.

Get Active

Following revelations that a quarter of caterers in York were using GMOs and 94% of them illegally selling it unlabelled (see Thin Ice issue IX), Trading Standards Today reported that Norfolk trading standards enforcement officers found that 42% of caterers inspected were using GM oil and mayonnaise without telling their customers. GM Freeze are coordinating a nationwide investigation into enforcement of GM labelling by caterers, and we encourage you to write to your local trading standards office to ask them what they are doing to uphold the law (see www.gmfreeze.org/uploads/tsabd_ehobriefing_sept_2006.pdf or www.gmfreeze.org/uploads/81C_GM_with_your_Chips_briefing.pdf for background). Please send copies of any replies you receive to eve@gmfreeze.org so we can add them to the statistics we publish.

In May The Scotsman reported that shoppers are increasingly using discount food stores like Aldi, Lidl, Iceland and Farm Foods as food prices rise. Given the creeping presence of GM ingredients in supermarkets like the Coop (see Thin Ice issue X), we’d like to ask anyone going to one of these up-and-coming food stores to check labels of items like vegetable oil to see if they are selling GMOs. Please send any information to eve@gmfreeze.org.

USDA shuts down pesticide monitoring scheme

In May the USDA announced it is closing down its pesticide monitoring programme, ending 20 years of widely-used annual reports on chemical use and risks across the country. As chemical use is increasing as pesticide resistance problems are coming to light in GM crops, a Centre for Food Safety spokesperson said, "We will no longer be able to reliably track trends in pesticide use, such as the substantial spike in the use of herbicides over the past six years." The USDA said it cannot afford to produce the US \$8 million report, but the move was opposed by farming, public interest and environment groups, as well as scientists and even industry groups who fear the lack of information will leave them open to safety claims. The USDA said consumers can get the information elsewhere.

One of the few such sources, the National Centre for Food and Agricultural Policy (NCFAP), a pro-GM lobby group, produces reports showing reductions in the pesticide use. Their claims are undermined by independent agronomist Dr Charles Benbrook, whose studies show yield reductions under some GM crops and a 73 million lbs increase in pesticide use after the introduction of GM despite industry promises of reduced use. His work shows that farmers are attracted by the promise of easier weed control, but that in fact they are now barely breaking even financially.

Contaminations

Japan: Data released in February from GM trials in Hokkaido shows that legislated separation distances for GM and non-GM crops are not only insufficient, but contamination by cross-fertilisation occurs even when those buffer zones are multiplied several times. Japan's national guidelines stipulate a separation distance of 30 metres for GM rice, but Hokkaido's own ordinance requires 300metres. Data from a three-year study testing the efficacy of these buffers showed cross-fertilisation in rice even at 600 metres. Contamination by cross-fertilization also occurred at the maximum distances for maize and sugar beet (1200 and 990 metres respectively). The research has thrown into sharp relief the inadequacies of both Japanese national guidelines and the concept of buffers to prevent GM contamination.

France: As if to prove the Japanese correct, in May routine testing of an organic maize farm in Villiers-en-Plaine in Deux-Sevres revealed GM contamination when the nearest GM field is over 35 kilometres away. The farmers lodged a complaint with the local gendarmerie, and in the absence of any response to their claim to the State for compensation (and given that no insurance company will insure against the risk of such contamination), plan to take legal action.

Belgium: In June the Health ministry announced that 15 fields owned by Bayer were contaminated with banned GMOs. The seed for the crop (colza, an oil crop similar to rapeseed) were contaminated by five per cent GM, which Bayer put down to "human error". The crops were destroyed, and Bayer say they will monitor the fields for several years to ensure no GMOs persist.

Sweden: Bayer may have to watch those fields for some time, as research announced in April showed that GM oilseed rape persists in fields for as long as 16 years before falling below 1%. Even with intensive chemical and manual attempts to kill such "volunteers", they continue to appear up to 10 years after planting. Given that labelling law requires any GM content to either be purely accidental (up to 0.9%) or labelled, the findings raise serious questions about how EU labelling law is being upheld.

Global News

Australasia

India: In February the PIL case launched by Aruna Rodrigues (see TI issue VIII) led the Supreme Court to appoint two scientists to the country's GM regulatory body to improve transparency. One of those appointees, Molecular scientist P M Bhargava, announced in May that the regulator ignored evidence of toxicity in Bt cotton, alleged to have caused the deaths of hundreds of sheep grazed

on cotton stubble, saying it was a “major argument” for suspending its cultivation. The regulator says that pesticides cause the ongoing deaths. Now documents reveal that the regulator knew toxicology reports showed no signs of pesticide components in dead animals, and that they were warned about the lack of biosafety studies on grazing animals on Bt stubble. Bhargava says these documents “contradict... unequivocally” the regulators’ claims, and that in his opinion the evidence strongly suggests “the possibility or even the probability” of Bt cotton causing the death of sheep.

Meanwhile a fair trade organic cotton project for 33 villages in the Akola region of Maharashtra eliminated farmers’ suicides last year in an area that has seen some 5,000 farmer suicides since 2005. The 100 farmers earned a Rs2 million premium for the 12,000 bales of organic cotton they grew. They are planning to expand the project, including in Gujarat. The farmers retain their own small plots (only 30% of participants have 10 acres) and are paid within seven days by the sponsoring textile manufacturer that has agreed to buy whatever they produce.

Malaysia: In May *Nature* reported that the Government is set to release GM mosquitoes in an attempt to control Dengue fever. Researchers say people should not worry, as the insects, produced by an Oxford firm with money from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, are genetically

modified to die out (through male sterilisation) rather than spread. *Nature* reported, “The country’s Academy of Sciences is likely to recommend the strategy to the Government within a month.”

Australia: In April Greenpeace called on the Independent Commission Against Corruption to investigate claims that the committee behind the controversial approval of GM oilseed rape in NSW was stacked with GM supporters who downplayed dissenting voices splitting the decision. Two committee members have risked imprisonment to blow the whistle on secret committee proceedings. The Government was legally obliged to record vested interests, but it took repeated requests to get access revealing a majority of committee members had vested interests in GM crops. The Primary Industries Minister had earlier introduced legislation to prevent the approval being challenged in court.

EU

Brussels: In May the European Commission sent back for the third time 3 GMOs up for approval on the grounds that scientific evidence submitted in support was insufficient. Environment Commissioner Dimas rejected the scientific evidence supporting 2 Bt maize varieties from Pioneer and Syngenta, but other Commissioners opposed his decision, which went against the advice of European Food Safety Authority’s (EFSA’s) advice. A compromise sent

the applications back to EFSA for further work. A BASF GM potato was also sent back to EFSA when it was discovered that it used an antibiotic market gene in contradiction to World Health Organisation advice. EFSA must now redo its entire evaluation of the potato. The moves cast significant doubt over EFSA’s reliability and signal a marked departure from the Commission’s usual acceptance of their findings.

Portugal: In April Judicial Police revealed that they class non-violent anti-GM actions as “terrorist” attacks. One such “attack” was entered in the 2007 EU Terrorism and Trend Report, involving over 100 people in a GM maize field. The lawyers for the prosecution of that case say even they cannot see how such action can be justified as “terrorist”. Specialists in penal law concur.

UK: After weeks of stalling the Government finally approved the groundbreaking IAASTD report “without reservation” in June (see *Thin Ice* issue X). They do not, however, appear to have fully embraced the findings of the report that GM is not the solution to world hunger. The Secretary of State for International Development “noted these reports...provide a valuable contribution to our understanding on agricultural knowledge, science and technology for development, and while presenting an overall consensus they also provide a diversity of views...[and] produced a series of options... to consider to help ensure that agricultural knowledge, science and technology fulfils

its potential to the reduction of hunger and poverty.” Since they accepted the findings “without reservation”, surely it’s time for UK Government policy on funding agricultural research here and around the world to abandon costly GM failures and support current, available, affordable solutions to improving global food sovereignty.

In May Defra approved Leeds University’s two-year trial for GM potatoes (see *Thin Ice* issue X). Defra said “precautionary conditions” were put on the consent “to ensure that GM potato material does not persist at the trial site” and that none of the potatoes will be used for food or feed.

Americas

US: The NFU voted in March to call for Congressional oversight hearings into the Federal scheme that gives reduced insurance rates to farmers in four states who plant at least 75% of Monsanto’s triple stacked feed/fuel GM maize. Conventional and organic farmers questioned the USDA giving this unfair advantage to select producers (only those in some areas who can afford the technology) by endorsing the products of a single private company. Scheme supporters say it was meant to lower the overall costs of crop insurance for everyone by encouraging farmers to plant seeds with higher yields or resistant to insects. The deal falls under the provisions of the Biotech Yield Endorsement programme under the 2000 Agricultural Risk Act. No other companies are known to have taken part.

When questioned about the appearance of favouritism, a USDA spokesperson said, “We knew it would look that way.”

Monsanto hikes price of Roundup

Meanwhile farmers planting Roundup Ready crops are reeling from Monsanto’s doubling the herbicide’s price in the last year. Reported reactions include farmers trying to bulk buy Roundup and dealers refusing to sell. In some places, where over 95% of farmers plant RR crops, price rises are sparking fears that the supply will dry up altogether. Monsanto is funnelling more Roundup to the US market, but declines to increase production to ease supplies. The company expects Roundup’s net profit to be US\$1.7-1.8 billion this year, more than double last year’s sales.

Canada: In March results of an audit by the Environment Commissioner showed that regulations of GM fish do not require researchers to report what they have created or if it escapes into the wild, meaning stronger or more adaptable GM fish may disadvantage natural competitors. The report recommended the gaps in the regulations be closed, including mandatory reporting of all GM fish and accidental releases of any GMO. A US company that operates in Canadian territory asked the US FDA in 2006 to allow its fish to be sold as food.

Stay in touch!

If you don’t normally receive this quarterly newsletter and would like to, please send £5 (to cover costs), made payable to GM Freeze at the address below:
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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.

New Freeze Publications

To help address the rise in pro-GM media attention, GM Freeze has produced several new briefings tackling some of the most common pro-GM arguments.

GM and Drought Tolerance – why drought tolerance is so elusive for GM research and development, and why we should stop pouring money into GM and expand cheap non-GM solutions to drought management (see www.gmfreeze.org/uploads/drought_briefing_final.pdf)

New Labour and the International Assessment of Agricultural Knowledge Science and Technology for Development (IAASTD): Meeting the Challenge – a special briefing by GM Freeze, Practical Action and Friends of the Earth (see www.gmfreeze.org/uploads/special_IAASTD_briefing.pdf)

Feeding the World with GM Crops: Myth or Reality? – an examination of the GM industry’s claims on crop yields (see www.gmfreeze.org/uploads/89D_yields_briefing%5B1%5D.pdf)

GM Crops Around the World – an accurate picture – GM Freeze calculations on how much of the world’s agriculture really is under GM crops (see www.gmfreeze.org/uploads/GM_crops_land_area_final.pdf)