

Thin Ice



the GM Freeze Campaign newsletter

Issue 12, October 2008



Members of GM Freeze, UK Food Group, Munloch Vigil and Via Campesina working with the Scottish Crofting Foundation at the Black Isle Show in August to spread the word about small-scale sustainable agriculture, food sovereignty and an end to GM animal feed.

GM Freeze AGM 2008

We are pleased to announce that this year's GM Freeze AGM will welcome guest speaker Percy Schmeiser, the Canadian farmer who was sued by Monsanto after his farm was contaminated with GM oilseed rape. The AGM will be held on 29 October at 2pm in London at Friends House in Euston. Non-members are welcome to attend from 3.10pm onwards, but space is limited, so please reserve your place by emailing eve@gmfreeze.org. Feel free to get in touch if you are unable to make it to London but would like details of Mr Schmeiser's other UK speaking dates in October.

Get Active

On 13 September the Scottish Government announced it ordered the destruction of plants and seeds involved in three oilseed rape test sites because the seed used was contaminated with GM. The Scottish Environment Minister Michael Russell said, "Had these plants been allowed to mature, the risk to the environment could have been very serious." On 14 September the Scottish Government, who have long had a GM-free policy, called for a UK ban on all GM following similar calls from Wales and an announcement by the Irish and Northern Irish that they want the whole island to be a GM Free zone.

GM Freeze welcomed their swift action to remedy the situation, and called on all relevant authorities to answer a series of questions to help prevent a repeat of such incidents. (see www.gmfreeze.org/page.asp?id=265&iType=107)

This is not the first time seed contaminated with GM have been planted in the UK. Please write to your MP asking her/him to write to Defra seeking assurances that all possible action is being taken to prevent such contamination being repeated. Key questions for Defra to answer include:

- * What was the country origin of the contaminated seeds and what type of plant breeding methods were employed?
- * Is the country of origin growing GM crops commercially?
- * What was the location of the seed production ground and what is its proximity to any GM oilseed rape fields?
- * What measures were used to prevent contamination of the seed lot during cultivation and post harvest?
- * Did the contamination arise from cross pollination or as a result of co-mixing GM and non-GM seeds before sowing or after harvest?
- * How did the seeds come to be planted before the results of GM scanning were available?
- * What measure will be taken to prevent further contamination?
- * What lessons can be learned for protecting seed imports destined for commercial crop production?
- * Who will be liable for the costs of preventing contamination and the loss of the trial results?

Please send us copies of any replies you receive. You can find your MP at <http://www.theyworkforyou.com/>.

Secret UK GM trials?

In July the media reported renewed calls to keep the locations of all GM test sites secret, pitting farmers and consumers against the researchers involved. The scientist at the University of Leeds whose GM potato trial was vandalised in June went as far as to liken those who destroy test sites to Nazi book burners while urging the UK to follow the Canadian lead and keep trial details secret. Others attempted to blame the low level of test sites in the UK on vandalism, saying the Europeans are "holding Africans back" from the benefits of GM crops.

GM Freeze Campaign Director Pete Riley notes that it was not vandalism that has curtailed UK GM trials, but rather there has been no need because:

- GM herbicide tolerant oilseed rape and beet were not approved because of evidence of long term harm to farmland wildlife.
- There is no market for GM crops because of supermarkets' and manufacturers' banning GM ingredients.
- Monsanto abandoned plans for GM cereals because of lack of EU markets.
- Bayer Crop Science halted work on GM maize after being given approval by the UK Government.
- The biotech industry has not come forward with any insect resistant crops that would find a market in the UK because pest levels do not merit them.
- Modern applications of traditional plant breeding, like marker assisted selection, are progressing and producing good quality crop varieties without resorting to GM.
- All GM seed varieties which had been entered for National Listing were voluntarily withdrawn by the applicants because of lack of market demand.

Details of GM test sites must be available publicly, as is recognised by the

requirements of EU legislation. This enables local farmers and allotment holders and beekeepers to assess the risks of contamination to their non-GM produce. As was clearly demonstrated in 2007 at Hedon in east Yorkshire, such public information made it possible for beekeepers, who had not been included in official consultations, to make it known to local borage growers that they would not risk their honey becoming contaminated from the proposed GM potato trial. Without the support of either beekeepers or borage growers, the farmer withdrew his permission for the trial to go ahead on his land.

GM trial locations are officially "confidential" in France, which has prompted a case at the European Court. Secrecy has not prevented direct action against French GM trials. The real question that scientists should address is why public reaction to the technology is so hostile, rather than make ludicrous analogies that belie a lack of respect for local people and businesses while attempting to force GM tests on them in secret or spending public money on a proposed secured national testing centre, as has been suggested by one academic.

Prince Pitches into the GM Debate

In August Prince Charles told the *Daily Telegraph* that corporate-driven industrial and GM agriculture is "guaranteed to cause the biggest disaster environmentally of all time". Environment Minister Phil Woolas responded that it was "easy for those with plentiful food" to ignore Third World hunger. In later interviews, the Minister apparently abandoned the Precautionary Principle and is now regularly calling for the Government to press on with "liberalising" the UK's regime for GM unless there is evidence that it does harm.

This is despite his admitting on *Farming Today* that such evidence does exist while contradicting himself by saying that the Government is prepared to wait "about a year" for such evidence to be brought forward.

The exchange prompted a flurry of activity, as attempts were made to misconstrue Prince Charles' remarks so it would appear as if he blamed GM for climate change, when in fact he was warning about the impacts of industrial agriculture and global corporate control of the food chain across the board. Government policy is at best confused, as the Cabinet Office Strategy Unit published in July the results of its 10-month study of UK food policies calling for:

- A major new report commissioned by the Chief Scientific Advisor into addressing food security amid climate change.
- Involving the public more in a "joined up" approach to food policy, with Defra leading development of a "new shared vision" for future food policy and a "decision paper" on fair prices, access to food and food security through competitive markets.
- Consumers should have more information on health and environment aspects of food, including when eating out (see Trading Standards story, *Thin Ice IX and XI*).

These recommendations are based on findings that as resources become more scarce, food production (said to create 18 per cent of the UK's greenhouse gasses) and consumption (including massive food waste) will need to change, including fertiliser use and animal diets. None of this is new, but it is significant that the Government has issued these findings and announced further studies to back up future action, particularly as a year ago the Environment Ministry was insisting the UK could rely on food imports. Hilary Benn

now says we cannot take food security for granted.

Yet the Government continues to push business-as-usual intensive and GM farming before the results of their new studies come in, and while profits for biotech companies may be booming, there are storms on the horizon as the foundations of the GM industry, and industrial agriculture more widely, are beginning to show cracks that threaten to force fundamental changes.

The costs of the inputs required for GM and other industrialised crops to perform to specification are skyrocketing. The underlying problem is that the costs of raw materials have risen sharply over recent months: phosphate, potash, ammonia and urea, as well as oil, have all seen previously unheard of price hikes. A good example is phosphorus, the price of which has gone up some 700 *per cent* in the past 14 months.

Further analysis published in June predicted that “peak phosphorus” (when demand exceeds supply) may come in 30 years. Brazil is reported to be considering nationalising phosphorus mines as a response. Extending agrofuels production onto forest and marginal lands will also increase demand for phosphorus-based inputs and will compete for the resource with food production. Dana Cordell, a senior researcher at the Institute for Sustainable Futures at the University of Technology in Sydney, said: “Quite simply, without phosphorus we cannot produce food. Phosphorus is as critical for all modern economies as water.” There is no synthetic substitute, meaning that countries with reserves, such as Western Sahara, Morocco, South Africa, Jordan, Syria and Russia, are poised to gain considerable political and economic clout.

All this means the fertiliser that costs a farmer £16 last year now costs as much as £58, and exporters like China are imposing new tariffs to protect their own supplies. Farm gate prices are not keeping up with these rising input costs and so farmers are having to radically rethink fertiliser use. Rather than applying fertiliser to achieve the highest yields, farmers are now calculating what they can afford to apply to remain profitable. If yield ceases to be the major consideration then this will have implications for overall food supply.

Farmers are looking to more traditional ways to maintain farm output and save money, including using farmyard manure and nitrogen fixing crops and using modern techniques to monitor the nutrient content of their soils so that only optimum amounts of fertiliser are applied. In common with poor farmers in the Global South, others are taking out loans to buy farm inputs relying on high prices to enable them to pay off their debts.

Meanwhile, Norwegian fertiliser giant Yara reported in July their profits tripled in the first half of this year, prompting accusations of profiteering, since these profits come on the back of a mere 19 *per cent* increase in volume of sales. Monsanto are also making hay while the sun shines: this year they have more than doubled the price of their major product the herbicide Roundup. GM farmers are contractually obliged to use Monsanto’s product on herbicide tolerant crops. In January 2008, Monsanto’s revenue tripled to US\$2.1 billion, with some US\$1 billion of profit from Roundup sales alone.

Global News

EU

On 4 July the French Environment Minister said a review of the EU’s procedures for vetting GMOs would not necessarily mean changing them substantially. Ministers from 27 EU countries met outside Paris to discuss “improving” current procedures. French Secretary of State for Ecology said, “There remain doubts, about an insufficient number of evaluation and long-term impacts, and a need for more transparency,” adding that some countries are requesting GM-Free status.

France called for the review earlier in the year, and a new *ad hoc* group was set to report in December after considering the effectiveness of research on the long-term effects of GMOs, the transparency of the research and whether NGOs have been sufficiently involved. Votes to approve new GMOs often fail to achieve the required qualified majority, as was seen in mid-July when Ministers failed to reach agreement on two authorisation requests for Bayer’s GM soybean and cotton.

Such deadlocks result in the issue being passed to the EC, who usually approve the GMOs unilaterally based on EFSA’s scientific recommendations. The Czech Environment Minister said that, “70 *per cent* of European citizens want to consume GMO-free foodstuffs,” so reviewing current policy must be considered. On 7 July UK Agriculture Minister Hilary Benn called for EU approvals of GMOs to be sped up.

In August EFSA published its opinion that Unilever’s yeast-based GM ice protein is safe for use in food. The product is designed to improve the creaminess of low-fat ice cream and other frozen foods, similar to those already for sale in the US, Australia and New Zealand. EFSA based its opinion on results of a study supplied by Unilever. In 2007 the FSA gave the product the nod, and EFSA’s opinion will inform the Commission’s final decision on the product.

In July University of Wisconsin announced it has also developed an undetectably colourless and tasteless GM “antifreeze” to create a smooth texture for ice cream.

Thin Ice the GM Freeze Campaign newsletter, Issue 12, October 08

UK

In August reports emerged of a Southampton University request to the Forestry Commission to grow GM trees in the UK as part of a biofuels study being conducted with Belgian and French researchers. Reduced lignin in the GM poplars is hoped to contribute to a 40 per cent higher ethanol yield than natural poplars. The project leader said: "It is hard to imagine a world in the future where these technologies are not deployed more widely. We need to get the evidence to see if these things can be deployed on a wide scale. The extreme environmentalists are preventing us from collecting the evidence. We have to go public and try to move the public debate forward."

Despite this hyperbole, an energy efficient and cost effective method for converting cellulose into ethanol has not been developed. The trial will also have to be approved by Defra. The Forestry Commission are not expected to consider the application until 2009 at the earliest, as they do not yet have a protocol for considering such requests in place, but if approved, the site would be made public.

GM trees are highly controversial because their longevity and prolific production of seeds and pollen (both of which can travel long distances) mean any problems may take generations to emerge. Similar to widening claims made in support of GM crops, GM trees are claimed to be future solutions to Dutch elm disease, sudden oak death and chestnut blight, but developments so far are for industrial applications.

An application for a test in Belgium was turned down after objections to the test cited a host of problems, including:

- *The trial includes the use of antibiotic resistant genes, which should be phased out by the end of 2008 under Belgian law.*
- *The trial does not gather data on the effects of the release into the environment.*
- *The low lignin property of the trees can be achieved by conventional methods of selection, and in any case makes trees vulnerable to disease.*
- *The positive impact on the climate is not clear, and in fact low lignin means the GM trees will release CO₂ more quickly once they die and will also affect soil fertility.*

- *The risk of genes spreading to the environment is higher with trees than with annual plants.*
- *The social relevance and benefit of the trial is not clear.*

Africa - Burkina Faso

In July two varieties of Monsanto's Bt cotton were approved for general use. The director of the National Biosecurity Agency says they have authorised 15,000 hectares for seed production and socio-economic evaluation in order to move into "generalised production of GM cotton" next year.

Promises of reduced costs of pesticide applications and 30 per cent yield boosts are tempting farmers whose harvest slumped nearly 50 per cent in the 2007/8 season. The cotton is the product of a co-ownership scheme under which Burkinabe scientists developed the varieties using a gene owned by Monsanto. Royalties from seed production will be split, with 28 per cent of proceeds going to Monsanto.

It's official: GMOs are food "contaminants"

For 18 years a host of countries working with the Codex Alimentarius (the collection of international standards, codes of practice and guidelines relating to all aspects of food production and safety) have been struggling against US opposition to institute international mandatory labelling of GMOs. Prior to the August meeting of the Codex Commission, a meeting of the Codex Committee on Food Labelling ended bitterly as a number of countries continue to say that Codex is not properly examining research on the dangers of GMOs.

US pressure forced the withdrawal of a paper on the subject prepared by South Africa, which outlined why labelling should be mandatory. It is reported that several countries indicated they would scrap Codex altogether and initiate their own labelling requirements for GMOs, leaving the whole of the Codex weakened and vulnerable.

The WHO and FAO, the lead bodies of the Codex, therefore announced they will undertake a program to identify "low-level contamination of GMOs in food". The definition of "low-level" will vary from country to country (the US permit 10% GMOs in FDA certified organic food), but the use of the word "contamination" is key and sets the tone for the

project. Such a move indicates that GMOs are not merely "substantially equivalent" ingredients, as the US claim, but something else that must be monitored. US objections to the phrase were unsuccessful. Observers now feel that guidelines for mandatory labelling are a logical outcome of such a study.

Monsanto to ditch GM Milk Hormone

In August, Monsanto announced its plans to "reposition" (read: sell off), their GM hormone (rBGH) (marketed as Posilac) which is used to increase milk production. The product is banned in many parts of the world including the EU but used extensively in the US. Monsanto Chief Hugh Grant said, "Milk isn't going to be a part of our future so I think if we met here in five or ten years time our goal is how we double crop yields specifically and corn, soy, cotton and vegetables."

Another Monsanto spokesperson said that sales of the product were up and that it is used in around one third of US herds, making it "very attractive" for an as yet unknown, and in any case confidential, prospective buyer. She said she did not know how the USDA came up with a herd treatment figure of a mere 17 per cent. She denied that sales were in fact falling as Starbucks, Kroger and Safeway (major US supermarket chains), Wal-Mart, Kraft, major US cheese producer Glanbia and others move away from Posilac.

In addition an increasing number of dairies and processors implement "rBGH-free" labels in response to consumer backlash against the product, despite Monsanto's strenuous use of litigation to prevent them. She also denied that the recent American Medical Association call for more safety research or American Nurses Association call to "eliminate" the use of rBGH had anything to do with their decision to sell.

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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