

Thin Ice



the GM Freeze Campaign newsletter

Issue 14, April 2009

Secrecy over Somerset contamination

Defra has refused to reveal the location of the crop of winter oilseed rape discovered to be contaminated with Monsanto's GM trait in Somerset last year. The contamination was discovered during tests following the Scottish Government's speedy response contamination incidents in seed trials in Scotland (see *Thin Ice* 13).

Campaigners, businesses and politicians have all joined the call for transparency. Defra have responded that, "... GM volunteers will not be a significant issue. A separate trial of a different variety of conventional Spring OSR was grown immediately adjacent by the same farmer. Tests indicate cross pollination contamination of this crop at under 0.01%. It is

|| This case shows up the absurdity of EU rules on GM. ||

Monsanto spokesperson

not proposed to monitor the local area for potential contamination. The accidental sowing of the GM seed has not posed any risk to the environment and nor should there be an economic prejudice to neighbouring farmers through possible cross-pollination."

Yeo Valley Organics wrote back to Defra saying, "The strategically important organic market in the UK is clearly very threatened by GM contamination such as this," and

Dorset County Council and the North Dorset and West Dorset district councils that border South Somerset expressed "extreme concern" in requesting the precise location writing, "any local authorities in the South West have policies ensuring that every thing possible will be done to ensure that no GM crops are grown in these areas."

Research in Scotland has shown GM pollen can travel up to 16 miles, and a Swedish study published last year showed that GM oilseed rape plants can continue to come up in fields for at least ten years after a crop, risking contamination of future crops, neighbouring farms, honey and the wider countryside. A Monsanto spokesperson said, "This case shows up the absurdity of EU rules on GM."

GM crops: Are they toxic?

GM Freeze are pleased to announce this meeting, hosted by Peter Ainsworth MP, at which we will hear from Professor Gilles-Eric Seralini of University of Caen. Prof Seralini will present his research revealing, among other things, that low levels of the adjuvants used in Roundup are toxic to human cells at concentrations likely to occur as residues in foods. His previous work found that GM Bt (pest resistant) maize crops produce one kilogram of toxin per hectare in all parts of

the plant, including edible parts.

Please join us on 19 May at 5pm in Committee Room 12 in the House of Commons. If you'd like to come, please inform Eve (on eve@gmfreeze.org or 0845 217 8992), as you will need an invitation letter from us to ensure a smooth passage through security (and remember that it can take up to 30 minutes to get through the screening required to enter Parliament).

TAKE ACTION

Help build our GM food list

In recent months we have noticed a few GM products for sale in the UK. We are starting a new list to help shoppers avoid these products and to help direct pressure on supermarkets to stop selling them (we've started the list on our website, along with other ongoing actions and updates).

If you find a product containing GM for sale in the UK, please send us (to eve@gmfreeze.org):

- the name of the product
- the GM ingredient(s) concerned
- the name and address of the shop where you found it

- the date you saw the item for sale
- a photograph of the label stating the GM content if at all possible
- what, if anything, the store manager has to say in response to any complaint you make (and you should complain or take action, see our action page for more ideas)

As long as some supermarkets say they are keeping an "open mind" about GM, we need to help them understand that their customers are still resolutely opposed.

Wales gets tough on GM coexistence

In February, Welsh Rural Affairs Minister Elin Jones announced the Government's intention to introduce new legislation to protect farmers from GM contamination, saying, "The Welsh Assembly Government's long-standing position is to adopt the most restrictive policy on GM crops that is compatible with European Union and UK legislation. It is not legally possible to declare Wales GM-free, but we will continue our restrictive approach." Proposals are set to include:

- options for imposing strict liability on those who grow GM crops and a voluntary compensation scheme funded by the industry (who still refuse to accept liability for their products), as well as a possible statutory route for redress;

- a statutory public national GM crop register with public access requiring registration 3 months prior to planting;
- a statutory requirement to inform all neighbours and landowners of intention to plant GM crops;
- statutory record keeping for GM producers and training for all those who handle GM crops on-farm;
- "significant isolation distances" between GM and non-GM crops based on the national average field size of 3 hectares;
- seeking views on the retention of the current 0.1% default seed threshold contamination level, as well as on GM Free Zones and possibly statutory prohibition of cultivating GM in all conservation areas, national parks and SSSIs.

Secret trials update

In a landmark case, the European Court of Justice ruled in February that EU Members cannot conceal the locations of GM releases and rejected the argument that secrecy is needed to prevent public disorder. French citizen Pierre Azelvandre requested information in 2004 from Alsace authorities on GM releases in his area, they refused, and he pursued the case. The Court ruled that while some GM test site information may be considered commercially sensitive and therefore not disclosed, the location itself must be made public.

'Just before the train comes into sight of the horse, passengers see a big sign saying 'Welcome to Britain, home to GM food research'. A minute later they see a 164ft high horse staring at them.'

Harry Meade, of Chippenham, reported in the *Telegraph* commenting on the 'Angel of the South' Ebbsfleet Landmark Project winning selection – a £2million, 33 times life-size horse that he says should be called the 'GM horse'

INTERNATIONAL ROUND UP

Asia

India

In January, the Government announced a “temporary halt” to the commercialisation of Monsanto subsidiary Mahyco’s Bt brinjal (eggplant) citing new scientific studies suggesting the crop is not safe for human consumption.

Mahyco commented, “Studies showed that there is no significant difference between conventional brinjal and BT brinjal when the products were fed to rats. There is no allergenicity or toxicity seen.”

However, a study by a team at Australia’s Institute of Health and Environmental Research showed studies by Mahyco were insufficient, including a failure to conduct reproductive studies and reporting of methodology and results often insufficient to be able to determine how or what was being measured. This was supported by later report published by a team lead by Professor Gilles-Eric Seralini at CRIIGEN at the University of CAEN, Mahyco’s statistical analysis was not sufficiently rigorous to meet the demands of peer review, containing a type of error that occurs when sample sizes are so low that a study cannot realistically be expected to find differences between test groups even if such clinical differences were present.

The Australian study concluded that the food safety studies presented by Mahyco “are simply inadequate to determine these matters”. In particular they raised concerns that public health issues had not been taken into account, pointing out that 1.15 billion Indians would be exposed to GM brinjal if it was allowed into the Indian food chain. Of particular concern were children, expectant mothers and elderly persons.

The French study listed significant differences that Mahyco and Indian regulators had failed to report on from Bt brinjal feeding studies. These included:

- Bt brinjal appears to contain 15% less kcal/100g;
- in goats: males fed from Bt “gained a lot less weight”;

- in rabbits: changes in food consumption and weight gain; modified levels of sodium, glucose, platelet counts and haemoglobin concentration;
- in cows: milk production increased by 14.3% similar to that expected by hormonal treatment;
- in rats: females fed Bt brinjal had decreased liver weights and liver to body weight ratios by 13%.

The CRIIGEN team concluded that Bt Brinjal “cannot be considered as safe” and “may present a serious risk for human and animal health and the release should be forbidden”.

Australasia

New Zealand

In March GM Free NZ took a case to court demanding the withdrawal of four applications by the country’s Environmental Risk Management Authority (ERMA) and AgResearch a Crown Research Institute (CRI) to develop, import and commercialise GM animals from nine species at any location for an indefinite period in order to develop biopharmaceuticals, nutraceuticals and diseased animals for research.

A spokesperson for GM Free NZ said: “These four generic applications seek the right to use animals as bio factories anywhere, anytime, and in any way that the applicant wants. They are so broad that they make it impossible for people to know if, and how, they will be affected now or at any time in the future.” There legitimate cause for concern both on animal welfare grounds and because in January GE Free NZ called for the closure of all GM trials by Plant and Food Research after it discovered repeated breaches of several conditions imposed on them. These included permitting experimental brassica plants to flower in the open at a site within two kilometres of a university Biological Husbandry Unit and a certified organic farm.

A spokesperson for GE Free New Zealand said, “If the ERMA and Biosecurity New Zealand fail to take action to punish the culprits they will

once again have proved themselves to be nothing more than facilitators for the cheap tricks turned by the rogue scientists at Plant and Food Research rather than regulators working in the national interest. The trial must be shut down immediately and brassica seed and honey within the Lincoln area tested for adventitious GE contamination.”

Americas

US

In January New Scientist reported that the Department of Agriculture is preparing to block imports of GM foods it considers to be a threat to agriculture, health or the environment. An official statement said, “Unless international developments in transgenic plants and animals are closely monitored, USDA could be unaware of potential threats that particular new transgenic plants or animals might pose to the nation’s food supply.” Officials expect the number of GM traits, as well as the countries producing them, to double by 2015 and note expected problems when new undeclared GM products enter the US as the USDA would be unprepared to test for them. In 2006 the US took a case to the World Trade Organisation to force the EU to accept imports of its own (underregulated) GM food and crops, saying EU regulations were too stringent.

In February the New York Times reported that group of scientists issued a complaint to the Environmental Protection Agency that biotechnology companies are preventing universities from fully researching the impact of GM crops. The group said this is due to patent laws requiring researchers must seek the permission of GM companies to conduct experiments using their seeds, that this is often denied, or that any permission granted is conditional upon the company concerned “reviewing” the scientific findings before agreeing to publication. Their complaint concluded, “No truly independent research can be legally conducted on many critical questions.”

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US and China

The GM Golden Rice Project to produce rice with enhanced betacarotene content to tackle vitamin A deficiency in the Global South has been dogged with controversy from the start. New problems emerged when the project's humanitarian board admitted that it was involved in four human feeding trials organised by Tufts University Medical School that fed the unauthorised GM rice to 50 adults and children in China and the USA. The revelation was in response to a formal protest by 32 scientists that such feeding trials breach the Nuremberg Code, which stresses, among other things, that clinical trials or experiments may not be conducted on children (who are unable to give fully informed consent) and that trials using adult must not be "frivolous" in over-promoting likely humanitarian benefit. Despite repeated requests, the signatories to the protest letter have been unable to gain sight of the experimental protocols used by the researchers, and the research team has refused to enter into any communication.

Professor Rob Russell of Tufts defended the work saying, "Golden rice was designed for nutritional enhancement. The Golden Rice research were (sic) not tests of a toxicant," as much is known about beta carotene, even in high doses. He said the trial process had government approval in both China and the US and that parental consent was sought for the children involved. As these trials seem to be about the efficacy of Golden Rice in delivering increased any unexpected chemical changes in the rice resulting from the GM insertion were apparently not addressed.

GM bans victory for Hungary and Austria

In February EU Member States voted down Commission proposals to force Hungary and Austria to lift their bans on growing Monsanto's GM maize MON810. It was the second time Hungary faced such a vote and the third time for Austria. The UK was one of only four countries to vote in favour of the Commission's move.

The Austrian Environment Minister said, "I'm ecstatic – I feel as if Austria has become the European Cup winner in soccer." The vote followed publication of a long-term study funded by the Austrian Government that showed damage to the reproductive systems of mice fed GM maize.

Prior to the vote the Hungarian Government declared it would use "all diplomatic and legal means – including the possibility of turning to the European Court of Justice – to maintain the defence of the country from GMOs."

Attention is now focussed on

similar bans in France, Greece, Poland and moves toward bans in Germany. The French Prime Minister announced in February that France will continue its ban on cultivating MON810 until the environmental risks are clarified, despite a report from the country's food watchdog contradicted previous advice and said the maize is safe. The Prime Minister said, "The decision to suspend the growing [of the maize] was taken as a precaution due to the potential environmental risks associated with a contamination of non-GMO crops." This despite being fined 10 million euros by the European Court of Justice in December 2008 for "unlawful conduct repeatedly engaged in by France in the GMOs sector."

Also in December 2008, EU Environment Ministers unanimously concluded that there the GMO approval process is weak, including that risk assessment requirements are not being met.

ACTION UPDATE

Over many months we have been working to press Trading Standards Authorities to uphold the law with regard to GM oil used by restaurants and caterers. In recent weeks Peter Brenton has had good results in working to establish a dialogue directly with Croydon Council. Peter has informed them of the lack of enforcement in his area, indeed he has helped educate them about the requirements on the law, and in response the Council has issued two guidance notes and a suppliers list that are being issued to establishments during regular food inspections. Inspectors will also now discuss requirements to inform customers that GM oil is being used. No testing budget is required for such enforcement, and such results show how much can be accomplished with a bit of persistence.

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.

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