

Thin Ice



the GM Freeze Campaign newsletter

Issue 17, April 2010

India's halt on GM brinjal sets a political firestorm

In February India's Union Minister for Environment and Forests Jairam Ramesh placed an indefinite moratorium on cultivation of GM brinjal (eggplant), a flagship project for Monsanto, until it is proven safe by further long-term safety assessments. Minister Ramesh said:

"As a responsible minister I had to take a considered decision. It is responsible to science, it is responsive to society. There is no overriding urgency to introduce Bt brinjal.

"It is my duty to adopt a cautious precautionary principle based approach and impose a moratorium on the release of Bt brinjal [un]till such time [as] independent scientific studies establish, to the satisfaction of both the public and professionals, the safety of the product from the point of view of its long-term impact on human health and environment, including the rich genetic wealth existing in brinjal in our country."

Dr P M Bhargava, the outspoken scientist appointed to India's Genetic Engineering Approval Committee by the Supreme Court to address allegations of a lack of transparency in its proceedings, praised the Minister for showing "very rare courage". GEAC approved Bt brinjal for cultivation last October, but "serious regulatory lapses" were exposed.



"It is my duty to adopt a cautious precautionary principle based approach and impose a moratorium on the release of Bt brinjal ..."

Minister Jairam Ramesh

The next day Minister Ramesh announced a country-wide series of public consultation meetings to reflect upon this decision and the public outrage it provoked. Eight Indian State Governments have come out against immediate approval of Bt brinjal.

Indian media reported widespread political fallout from moratorium decision. The Prime Minister announced that the Environment Minister would not have the last word on any GM food after the Union Agriculture Minister wrote to him saying the decision would "set the clock back" for Indian science and the

country's Economic Advisory Council pressed for more "frontline" agriculture technology. The Union Science and Technology Minister said that Bt brinjal was safe and that emotions should be kept out of science.

Meanwhile Indian media also reported that travel visas were denied to the director of Tuscany's agriculture agency and a professor of genetics at the University of Florence, who were scheduled to attend a meeting on GM-free agriculture.

More disturbing is the new Biotechnology Regulatory Authority for India Bill proposing powers to stifle criticism of GM "without any evidence or scientific record". Despite a Constitutional guarantee to freedom of speech, the bill proposes a Rs 200,000 fine and a minimum six months in jail for GM critics, with a heavier Rs 500,000 fine for "obstructing" research. The UN gives the 2008 average Indian annual income as £1,061 (about Rs 48,800).

"Whoever, without any evidence or scientific record misleads the public about the safety of the organisms and products ... shall be punished with imprisonment for a term that shall not be less than six months but which may extend to one year and with fine which may extend to two lakh rupees or with both."

BRAI Bill Chapter 13 Section 63

In the courts

EU

In November France's highest court upheld two false advertising convictions against Monsanto for claiming that Roundup is "biodegradable" and it "left the soil clean".

In February Bulgaria introduced a five year ban on GM cultivation.

US

In February a US District Court ordered Bayer to pay US\$1.5 million in damages to three farmers for losses caused by the ongoing 2006 contamination of US rice supplies with the experimental LL601. The ruling followed December's court order that Bayer pay two other farmers US\$2 million, and there are some 500 similar cases pending.

Meanwhile Monsanto's dominance of the market (with 90% of the soya market just the tip of the iceberg) has finally drawn the attention of US Department of Justice antitrust investigators, and the US Supreme Court will soon hear a case about the safety of GM Seed. Watch this space ...

Industry figures signal losing ground

In what was reported as a "setback" and "slowdown" for GM cultivation, the annual industry-funded International Service for the Acquisition of Agro-biotech Applications report showed that globally in 2009:

- GM crops covered just 2.7% of agricultural land, meaning over 97% of the world's farmland grows non-GM food.
- Seven out of 25 countries reduced GM cultivation areas, including the so-called "mega" countries of China and Paraguay.
- No new countries grew GM crops during this period.
- The expansion of GM maize in

Brazil alone accounted for over 60% of the 9 million hectares increase in GM cultivation. Bt cotton expanded slightly in India.

- The US, Brazil, Argentina, India, Canada and China grew nearly 95% of all GM crops.
- In Europe, GM is losing its shine, too:
- The area growing GM maize fell for the second year running, down in Germany (by 100% due to the new ban), the Czech Republic (by 31%), Romania (by 57%) and Slovakia (by 54%).
 - In Spain the areas under GM maize fell 4%, with declines

GM-free labels in the

In November the official French advisory body on GMOs recommended to the government that a GMO-free label should be based on a lower threshold than in EU legislation.

The government is now expected to issue a proposal based on this advice and become the latest EU country to introduce such labels so consumer can tell where animal products come from GM feed. Ireland is also poised to bring in a GM-free labelling scheme, while Germany and Austria are already using them.

Meanwhile, in November

"The New Zealand Commerce Commission accepted evidence that animals fed on GM components ARE different from those reared using non-GM feed."

the New Zealand Commerce Commission accepted evidence that animals fed on GM components ARE different from those reared using non-GM feed. Complaints about a poultry

GM

in five of the seven main growing regions.

- The area in Poland under GM remained static, and five other countries have banned GM maize cultivation altogether.

The vast majority of GM production does not feed people, but still goes to animal feed, industrial scale agrofuels or to produce cotton fibre.

Gene Ethics Director Bob Phelps said, "Pushing GM is like peddling Windows 95 – the technology and its products are past their use by date."

EU

producer's advertisements claiming that "research confirms that animals that consume feed with a component of GM are no different compared to animals that have been fed a low GM or GM free diet" lead to the investigation, and the NZCC has ruled that this breached the Fair Trading Act by making false or misleading claims.

EFSA (EU) and the FSA (UK) maintain there is no need to label products from GM-fed animals because they are no different to non-GM-fed.

Revolving doors

US In November 85 groups and 38,000 individuals objected to President Obama's appointment of Islam Siddiqui (Vice President for science and regulatory affairs at CropLife America, a coalition of companies including Syngenta, Monsanto, Dow Chemical and DuPont) as chief agriculture negotiator in trade talks.

EU In January EFSA confirmed that the former head of its GMO-panel moved directly from that post to a job with Syngenta without any objections or restrictions. The woman left EFSA in March 2008 and took up her Syngenta post that May, despite EU regulations stating that former members of EU public services must seek permission for approval for new positions within two years of leaving their public posts. She said in emails to colleagues that she would be approaching EFSA personally with regard to GM approvals, and took part in a meeting with EFSA and the Commission in March 2009.

UK In January the BBSRC appointed Professor Maurice Moloney as Director and Chief Executive of Rothamsted Research, the UK's leading agricultural research centre. Moloney is former Chief Scientific Officer at pharma company SemBioSys, and prior to that Moloney led the Cell Biology group at Calgene (acquired by Monsanto in 1997).

In February the John Innes Centre announced the appointment of Professor Dale Sanders (a vocal GM supporter and head of biotechnology at the University of York) as its new Director and Chief Executive.

EU GMO approvals

In November Monsanto's MON 89034 and MON 88017 and Syngenta's MIR 604 were authorised for import, processing and food and feed use.

In March BASF's high starch potato Amflora was approved for cultivation and animal feed, with three GM maize varieties carrying "stacked" (multiple) GM traits (MON863xMON810, MON863xNK603, MON863xMON810xNK603) now approved for import.

However the application for EU approval of high-lysine corn was quietly withdrawn after the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA) asked for further evidence of its safety.

Meanwhile in December researchers from CRIIGEN and Universities of Caen and Rouen published research on 90-day feeding trials showing approved GM maize (Mon810, Mon863 and NK603) clearly show sex and dose dependent adverse impacts on the kidneys and liver, as well as different levels of damage to the heart, adrenal glands, spleen and haematopoietic system. The work was based on Monsanto's own raw data, which has been selectively presented to approvers around the world as the basis for current authorisations.

GET ACTIVE

Read all about it

The UK General Election gives us an excellent opportunity to write letters for publication to local and national newspapers to highlight your concerns about GM. Current issues of concern include two GM potato trials in the UK, the EU approval of the industrial Amflora potato and the introduction of GM-free labels on animal products in Austria, Germany, France and Ireland (but not the UK).

There's good news, too, including the moratorium on Bt brinjal in India and the industry report showing losses in GM acreage discussed in this newsletter – both of which help make the point that GM is not the answer to the world's food needs. There's more information at www.gmfreeze.org, and we can answer any questions you may have.

Of course depending on when the election is called, you can also either write to candidates or to newly elected MPs about these concerns and others. There's a new General Election action on the website with lots of advice and key demands – hard copies are available from Eve for those of you not on the web.

THANK YOU!

Our January fundraiser was a big success, and we thank everyone who donated to our work. We raised over £3,000, and a number of you also either increased or started giving monthly donations. Your support is invaluable and very much appreciated.

So much has happened since the last *Thin Ice* that this edition will focus on short updates to cover as many items and interests as we can. Further information is always available from Pete and Eve or at www.gmfreeze.org.

NEWS IN BRIEF

February

Research from Kansas State University showed expanding weed resistance to Roundup, as kochia (fireweed) was added to the list of some 130 weed types on 11 million acres in 40 US states now confirmed as having acquired resistance to glyphosate. Monsanto reportedly declined to answer questions about the significance or expected continued expansion of resistance, but said they are working with scientists to evaluate the problem and how farmers should respond. Current recommendations include using other herbicides. For more details on weed resistance and GM crops see our briefing at http://www.gmfreeze.org/uploads/resistance_full_Briefing_final.pdf.

August

Puerto Rico passed a law introducing financial incentives and other measures that ease the process by which biotech corporations obtain trade rights and licenses on the island. Compliance with legalities will open the door to assistance for development and mass production of novel transgenic plants, including pharma crops. Since 1987 Puerto Rico has registered 2,177 official GM field tests, bringing it to third place behind Hawaii and Indiana.

November

Japan found illegal GM flax in Canadian shipments as the Triffid contamination rumbles on.

January

USDA figures for 2009 showed that one quarter of all US grain crops now become biofuel rather than food as subsidies and minimum fuel content laws take effect. One analyst said the 107 million tons of grain used is "enough to feed 330 million people for one year at average world consumption levels".

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.**

GM Freeze Campaign, 50 South Yorkshire Buildings, Silkstone Common, Barnsley S75 4RJ
Tel: 0845 217 8992 Email: info@gmfreeze.org www.gmfreeze.org