

Thin Ice



the GM Freeze Campaign newsletter

Issue 18, July 2010

New Government dogged by pro-GM bias allegations

The FSA's public "dialogue" about GM is in tatters after two advisors from the independent steering committee resigned over inbuilt bias in the process and what one called the FSA's "dogmatically entrenched" approach to GM. The discredited process, called a "cynical sham that insults the public" by the *Daily Mail*, was initiated at the request of the previous Government, has been referred to Ministers to decide if it should continue.

The first to leave was Dr Helen Wallace of GeneWatch UK, whose resignation letter outlined collusion between the FSA and the biotech industry, including industry suggesting edits to FSA reports that later shaped FSA positions and the dialogue process itself. The letter also revealed that a company being asked to conduct the public engagement already worked for a biotech company to improve their image.

Her conclusion was that: "I joined the Group with some scepticism and it has now become clear to me that the process that the FSA has in mind is nothing more than a PR exercise on behalf of the GM industry. In my view, this would be a significant waste of £500,000 of taxpayers' money."

A week later the second to resign was steering group Vice Chair Dr Brian Wynne, a renowned expert in public engagement with science, saying comments from FSA Chair

"I am not prepared by default to aid and abet this kind of systematic failure of institutional integrity in what is a crucial public arena."

Lord Rooker: "... tipped what was before this an evolving and finely-balanced tension, between the possibility of our eventually being able to do something good and proper with the public money effectively at our disposal, or instead contributing by default to an abuse of public propriety, legitimacy and trust ... in the end I have been forced to the reluctant conclusion that there are too many unaccountable forces, not all deliberate, working against a proper process, one which would show integrity and legitimacy from top to bottom, and which would therefore command respect whatever the specific outcomes might have been, and whomever's preferences might have been offended or affirmed ... I am not prepared by default to aid and abet this kind of systematic failure of institutional integrity in what is a crucial public arena, involving deep questions of science and public good."

Meanwhile the *Guardian* reported, "In her first interview in charge of the department of environment food and rural affairs, the minister [Caroline Spelman] committed the

new coalition to becoming the most pro-GM government yet, saying she was in favour of GM foods 'in the right circumstances'." Citing "benefits to developing countries, like drought resistance or resistance to high salt content in water" (see www.gmfreeze.org for documents debunking these myths), Spelman agreed that the FSA should not be using public money to promote GM crops.

The Sunlight Centre, which campaigns for transparency in lobbying, had already forwarded a letter in May about a possible conflict of interest in Spelman's appointment to the permanent secretary at Defra, saying: "Her husband, Mark Spelman, remains a director of the company still trading under the secretary of state's name in sectors closely related to issues for which she is responsible. Given that the company is still using her maiden name to trade, a name by which she would have been known when active in farming politics in the 1980s, this is clearly of public interest."

Spelman had started the food and biotechnology lobbying company with her husband in 1989, and although she resigned her Directorship in 2009 her interview sparked accusations of vested interests at the very top of Defra within days of her appointment. After her *Guardian* interview an application was made to Companies House to close down the company, but questions about pro-GM influence continue to rise.

INTERNATION

Europe

UK

■ GM potato trials start

One of the first acts of the new Coalition Government's Defra office was to sign off approval for the Sainsbury's Laboratory trial at the John Innes Centre, Norfolk of GM potatoes engineered to resist blight. The applicant's plan to use composting to manage waste from the trial was rejected, but otherwise conditions set were not unusual.

In early June 300 potatoes were planted behind chain link fence. A JIC spokesman said in a BBC interview that it was a shame taxpayers' money had to be wasted on such security. GM Freeze believes spending over £1.7 million in research funding over 10 years to produce just one crop is the real waste. The trial is due to run for three years. Many thanks to everyone who participated in our action to try to stop this trial.

The trials began amid warnings that farmers are already leaving potato production due to poor farmgate prices despite high retail margins driving a crisis of confidence in the viability of farms. The Chair of the Fresh Potato Suppliers Association (and former Chair of the British Potato Council) said, "We are at the point where a number of growers are going to exit...they do not see a fairness in the supply chain ... Retailers need to take a far longer-term view because the industry is so fragile."

The NFUS called on growers, processors and retailers to address supply chain waste to find a use for the 1.19 million tonnes of British potatoes a year that never make it into kitchens. The NFUS also said GM could "assist" potato farmers.

■ Shoppers reject GM feed

Meanwhile, GM Freeze and Friends of the Earth commissioned a GfK/NOP poll that showed 89% of consumers want labels to help them identify foods from animals fed GM, nearly two thirds wanted supermarkets to avoid GM animals feed altogether and 72% being prepared to pay more to ensure animal products are from animals fed a GM-free diet. (see summary of results with a breakdown by supermarket at www.gmfreeze.org/page.asp?ID=436&iType=1083) The Agriculture Biotechnology Council responded it, "looks forward to a time when informed consumers are able to vote with their wallets on this issue and farmers are able to access the tools they need to produce high quality affordable food." Since labels are possibly the only way for consumers to make informed choices about what they buy, we look forward to ABC's support in developing them.

Germany

■ In June it was revealed that between 2,000-3,000 hectares in seven states were planted with maize seed contaminated with up to 0.1% of the unapproved GM NK603. Greenpeace allege officials were aware of the problem as early as March, but that bureaucratic delays prevented the information being relayed to farmers until after they had planted, meaning crops will have to be ploughed under to prevent further contamination via cross pollination. The source of the contamination is not known.

Netherlands

■ In May 50 members of Roundup Monsanto chained themselves to the gates of the company's main facility in the Netherlands and shut it down for a day. The protest was aimed at Monsanto's 2008

takeover of De Ruiter Seeds (the previous occupants of the building), demanding an end to such acquisitions and to patents on seeds and living organisms. De Ruiter Seeds was the third major Netherlands company bought by the chemical company in the last five years, contributing to their 23% share of the global seed market.

Meanwhile in May Monsanto's shares dropped to below US\$60/share for the first time since 2007. In April the company announced a sharp downward revision of their aim to double profits between 2007 and 2010 to a more modest "13-17% growth", with their Chief Executive saying, "Moving away from our original goals is difficult for us to accept, but it's the right thing for us to acknowledge now."

Brussels

■ In May the Parliament's Environment Committee voted overwhelmingly to:

1. reject "foods derived from cloned animals and their descendants" and called for a moratorium on all sales until legislation enacting a ban is in place;
2. enact clear labelling on "All ingredients present in the form of nanomaterials"
3. enact clear labelling on "Products produced from animals fed with genetically modified feeding stuffs"

The proposals will now be voted on by the entire Parliament in July, and it is hoped their new codecision powers will help ensure the measures are enacted and not dropped by the Commission, as has happened in the past. Watch www.gmfreeze.org for updates and action.

■ Amflora still causing a stir

The March cultivation approval of BASF's GM Amflora potato (see *Thin Ice* 17) caused uproar across the EU. Hungary, Bulgaria,

Luxembourg and Austria banned the crop almost immediately, with Greece likely to follow, France is seeking expert advice, Italy has said it will ban it and Malta also actively opposed the authorisation. However, Germany, the Czech Republic, Sweden and the Netherlands are expected to plant Amflora.

Commission President Barroso was openly jeered by MEPs in the Strasbourg Parliament after the approval, as MEPs held up posters reading "For a GMO-free Europe" and said the Commission had "failed to follow proper parliamentary procedure" by not consulting the assembly before reaching its decision.

Meanwhile more than 40 civil society groups have called upon the Commission to reverse the decision as a preliminary to taking a law suit to the European Court of Justice based on the use of an antibiotic resistance marker gene (ARM) in Amflora.

According to the groups' legal advisor, the approval of Amflora violates the 2005 Deliberate Release Directive (2001/18), which conditionally prohibits the approval of genetically modified plants that contain antibiotic resistance markers "that may have damaging effects on human health or the environment" (article 4). Since Amflora confers resistance to the important antibiotic kanamycin, it should not have been approved.

Bulgaria

■ In June Bulgaria moved to ban all GM products and ingredients in food for children in an amendment to the Bulgarian Food Act tabled by the Chair of the Parliamentary Committee on Agriculture and Forests. The Act also calls for a full ban on the distribution and sale of food products containing GMOs in child

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care centres, kindergartens, schools and commercial outlets within 100 metres unless placed in separate areas clearly labelled as selling GMOs. New controls on imports would require proof of lab analysis on GM levels. Bulgaria has previously been warned by the Commission that it is not in compliance with EU rules.

Americas

US

■ Insect shifts under GM

Hot on the heels of the March admission by Monsanto that cotton pest pink bollworm has now developed resistance to Bollgard I in four districts in India, and following the 2008 University of Arizona study revealing bollworm was developing resistance to BT cotton in US cotton fields (see *Thin Ice* 10), a new problem is emerging in GM fields.

A study by Testbiotech published in March showed GM Bt maize MON810 is so “successful” in eliminating maize pests that their natural competitors the western bean cutworm have moved in to become a significant new problem in crops. “Several reports show that the damage is increasing from year to year,” explained the Testbiotech executive director and report author.

The report says the cause of the spread of the new pest is not well known among US farmers – they have only been told how to identify infestation and which insecticides to use to fight it. Instead of issuing warnings about the problem, which has been growing since 2000, GM companies are trying to use it as a way to sell both pesticides and new varieties with up to six different Bt GM traits “stacked” in one variety.

■ GM trees

In May the USDA issued an environmental assessment stating there would be no

environmental problems caused by an open air trial of 260,000 GM eucalyptus trees in 28 locations over 300 acres. While 27 of these locations will permit the trees to flower, they are said to be engineered not to produce pollen. The trees will be tested for cold weather tolerance toward creating new sources of paper pulp and biofuels. Eucalyptus are already known to be heavy water users, that rapidly growing and are already invasive in some areas. GM trees cause considerable concern because of their long lifespan and potential to spread genetic contamination very widely through pollen and seeds. The USDA was reported to have received some 12,462 objections to the trial and 45 submissions in support.

Canada

■ GM Pigs on your plate?

First created in 1999, the genetically modified “enviropig” is said to retain more phosphorus inside itself, thereby reducing the concentration in its manure by about 60%. If successful it would allow factory farms to house around twice as many animals without any additional regulatory “burden” of managing manures to prevent water pollution.

Earlier this year Canadian authorities approved the pig for breeding and further study, and the developers have now requested permission from both Canadian and US regulators to allow the progeny from this work onto commercial farms and into the human food chain. There have been no known food safety tests done on the GM pig. A University of Guelph spokesperson said: “U of G is a life sciences institution, and much of our research centres on how science can help us change lives and improve life. Developing technology that provides a solution to

a common environmental problem fits with this research philosophy.”

The head of Manitoba University’s animal science department said, “There’s not a big push within the industry to embrace that particular direction.” One farmer representative said, I don’t even want to talk about it at all.” A Canadian MP, noting that many countries already ban or limit GM crop imports, said, “I think we have a very good pork industry here. We need to find a way to help them farm sustainably. The answer is not to bring in some kind of monster pig to solve our problem.”

■ GM Flax spreads

The global contamination of flax, believed to have initiated in Canada, continues to grow, as more countries notify that they have found the illegal GM in their supplies. The total is difficult to figure, as current database searches show 25 countries affected, but at least 16 countries previously notified as affected no longer appear, meaning the count by GM Freeze of affected countries is at least 41. Products affected include item in five categories: “dietetic foods, food supplements, fortified foods”, “nuts, nut products and seeds”, “cereals and bakery products”, “Feed materials” and “compound feed”.

Disturbingly the list of countries now named as origins of the illegal GM also appears to be growing, with Russia, Turkey, China, the US and Moldova joining Canada. This suggests that seed stocks have also been contaminated as well as that materials have been transhipped, illustrating the potential for GM contamination if laissez faire approaches to separation distances, segregation and labelling are accepted. There is no doubt that contamination with the illegal, untested GM crop has gone around the

world. GM Freeze has issued a new Freedom of Information request to try to get to the bottom of this global problem and to press the Government as to why they have yet to act publicly to protect consumers.

■ Weed resistance emerges

In May Canada’s first glyphosate resistant “superweed” was confirmed in Ontario. A University of Guelph weed scientist said, “It’s not isolated to one farm,” adding that resistant plants develop naturally in the environment with the overuse of Roundup.

Haiti

■ In June 10,000 peasants marched to protest against the Monsanto/USAID donation of some 475 tons of non-GM hybrid corn and vegetable seed. A spokesman said the donation was “a very strong attack on small agriculture, on farmers, on biodiversity, on Creole seeds ... and on what is left of our environment in Haiti”.

He added: “The foundation for Haiti’s food sovereignty is the ability of peasants to save seeds from one growing season to the next. The hybrid crops that Monsanto is introducing do not produce seeds that can be saved for the next season, therefore peasants who use them would be forced to somehow buy more seeds each season... Furthermore, these seeds require expensive inputs of synthetic fertilizers and pesticides that Haiti’s farmers simply cannot afford. This creates a devastating level of dependency and is a complete departure from the reality of Haiti’s peasants. Haitian peasants already have locally adapted seeds that have been developed over generations. What we need is support for peasants to access the traditional seeds that are already available.”

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Demanding Transparency: fighting fund appeal

In December 2008, the Government announced that a Somerset field was planted with oilseed rape contaminated with a low level of an unauthorised GM event, which then transferred to contaminate a neighbouring crop as well.

The source of the problem was a shipment of Monsanto non-GM seeds from the US contaminated with a Roundup tolerant strain. Without EU authorisation, planting the seed was technically illegal, but the farmer contracted to grow the crop did not know about the contamination before planting.

GM Freeze believes ... the precise location of the contaminated field should be public.

GM Freeze believes it is important that the precise location of the contaminated field should be public so that neighbouring farmers, beekeepers, gardeners and allotment holders can be alerted and on the look-out

in order to decrease the chances of the contamination spreading further. The next case of seed contamination, not a hypothetical concern, could mean several hundred farmers and thousands of acres of good land could be affected for decades.

We have been fighting to get this information released ever since (see www.gmfreeze.org/page.asp?ID=444&iType=1083 for details and updates). We have submitted a formal appeal to the latest refusal to publish the location of the contamination. We may win or we may lose, but it is important to test the system, demonstrate that it is currently working in favour of the polluter and secrecy and try to overturn this dangerous precedent.

We have been advised to take legal advice and use a barrister to present our case at an appeal tribunal under the Environmental Information Regulations, which will cost about £2,000.

We would be most grateful for any contribution you can make to help us pay these legal costs and put up the best possible case to expose the cosy relationship between Defra and the biotech industry.

The GM polluter has to be made to pay. Your contribution to this appeal will help us challenge the secrecy the biotech companies crave and maybe help overturn it.

INTERNATIONAL ROUNDUP

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Africa

Kenya

After years of protest Kenya's President signed into law new biosafety legislation in June, making it the fourth African country behind Burkina Faso, Egypt and South Africa to do so. Researchers welcomed the move saying it would pave the way for open air trials and "mass production" of GMOs. Critics argued that Kenya is not equipped to protect itself from the risks associated with such a move. A spokesman for the East Africa Natural History Society said, "The new technologies require very sophisticated analysis and tools and systems that Kenya, as a developing country, just does not have and cannot afford."

South Africa

In May it emerged that South Africa has dumped nearly 300,000 metric tons of GM maize onto Kenya, Mozambique and Swaziland in the previous four months. There is a striking similarity between

South Africa's actions and those of USAid, which has used aid shipments to off-load unwanted GM maize produced in the US. The Director of the African Centre for Biosafety said, "As much as 80% of the grain trade in East Africa is informal and undocumented; the arrival of 280,000 tons of GM maize into Kenya presents the potential for genetic contamination on an unimaginable scale." The ACB paper echoed Kenyan concerns that the country is of "vital strategic interest" to the GM industry, but it "severely lacks the capacity to ensure the safe handling and monitoring of such a huge volume". Neither Mozambique nor Swaziland has any biosafety legislation in place, and Swaziland's rejection of GM shipment were out manoeuvred by South Africa ignoring the country's wishes and re-issuing permits to other companies. This is due to weaknesses in the Biosafety Protocol, which was designed to control the transboundary movement of live GMOs.

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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