

INTERNATIONAL ROUNDUP

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about the potential for contamination. Another farmer said, "Things are panning out as we predicted – in fact worse than we could have imagined. We warned [the Minister] a buffer zone of five metres was a joke."

GM Freeze believes strict liability for all damage from GM crops should rest with the consent holder (ie, the GM company, not the farmer who buys authorised seed).

Asia

Pakistan

Much public discussion followed the announcement that an agreement with Monsanto to provide the Pakistani government with Bt cotton seed would be signed by the end of December. Based on a Memorandum of Understanding signed in April 2010, the deal was attacked by local seed companies and organic cotton farmers who feared being driven out of business by Monsanto. Opponents pointed out that promises of higher yields had not been demonstrated with field trials. The agreement requires the Government to pay Monsanto compensation for any unauthorised Bt plantings, leading the Chair of the Lahore Chamber of Commerce to say, "Virtually the company is asking the government to ensure profits and market share for itself." It is understood that a large part of the Pakistani cotton crop, some say as much as 40%, is illegally planted GM from seed smuggled into the country, which costs Monsanto royalties. In mid-December a Government Minister said the deal had yet to be finalised, with some reports suggesting an agreement may take another two years to reach.

GM mosquito trial "last bastion of colonialism" – GeneWatch UK

In December GeneWatch UK released a report questioning the role of British scientists in secret experiments releasing millions of GM mosquitos in the Cayman Islands by Oxford-based company Oxitec, a company with close ties to biotech giant Syngenta. GeneWatch revealed that no public consultations were held, nor was informed consent sought from local people for the release, nor did financial backers the Wellcome Trust and Oxford University exercise any ethical oversight in the work. The company has also received more than £2.5 million in public funds from the UK Government, as well as some US\$5 million from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation.

The GM male mosquitos are said by the company to be "sterile" but in fact produce offspring that die before they mature – most of the time. Some 3-5% of offspring from females that mate with the GM males survive. The aim is to reduce the population over time to help fight Dengue Fever, but there are many unanswered questions about their release, such as the efficacy of the sterility mechanisms and impacts on the receiving ecosystems.

Oxitec says the releases last year were "well known" in the Caymans,

and that they carried out extensive risk analysis, with a spokesman saying, "We did lots of engagement work in Cayman, but no special effort either to spread the word internationally or not to." The company presented unpublished "results" of the trials to the American Society of Tropical Medicine and Hygiene in November.

The GeneWatch UK report points out that the company is heavily in debt and is required to pay £2.25 million to a US venture capitalist by 2013. The company is a spin-off from Oxford University and is expected to generate income for the University, but at present they are losing £1.7 million annually. Their business plan requires them to commercialise "products" and charge fees for ongoing releases of GM mosquitoes to generate income, and these pressures may be contributing to a culture of secrecy aimed at keeping public resistance to a minimum.

Trials are expected in Malaysia and the US soon. Activists there are concerned that the potential removal of a whole species could trigger unpredictable and harmful changes in the ecosystem. For example, if the population of one mosquito is reduced, a more aggressive species may move in bringing other diseases that are harder to control. Oxitec's computer models do not include such complex impacts and the company do not appear to have made any attempt at field work to gather any data. The Chair of the Centre For Environment, Technology and Development Malaysia wants assurances, including what plans are in place to control the GM mosquitos after they are released, saying, "If these mosquitos are completely safe, then why the hush-hush?"

Oxitec's future plans include GM agricultural pests to help combat the growing problem of insects resistant to GM Bt crops (including the GM pink bollworm in the Bt story on page 3).

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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Thin Ice



the GM Freeze Campaign newsletter

Issue 20, January 2011

GET ACTIVE

Why can't clones be traced?

In December the Food Standards Agency (FSA) advised the Government there are no health reasons to prevent food from clones and their offspring being placed on the UK market. Crucially they also said that there was no food safety reason to require the food to be labelled to enable consumers to decide for themselves whether to buy the products.

Defra Minister Caroline Spelman confirmed the Government's opposition to both a ban on food from clones and labels. It is expected that food from clones themselves will have to acquire Novel Food authorisation, but meat and milk from cloned offspring can now pass directly to consumers.

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UK Food and Farming Minister Jim Paice ruled out any requirement to label foods from clones or their offspring on the grounds that, "It is not possible to identify whether milk or meat is from a clone, let alone the offspring of a clone," a view backed by the FSA.

GM Freeze has written to Mr Paice

asking him to explain his view that tracing clones is not possible given the comprehensive system of import licenses, animal passports, tags and other mechanisms put in place to address BSE and to comply with European regulations.

Please write to your MP asking her/him to write to Mr Paice asking him to explain:

- why clones cannot be traced given that a system for traceability of animals is already in place;
- why food from clones and their offspring cannot be labelled when other concepts that also cannot be detected in the product (like fair trade and free range) do carry labels.

Means for GM to escape "previously overlooked"

In October a report by University of Bristol demonstrated a previously unknown means for GM DNA to move between species in the wild. *Agrobacteria*, which naturally alters plants' genes to form crown galls, is now known to also permanently alter the DNA of other life forms, like fungi. One of the authors said, "This study suggests that the encounter

between this bacterium and a fungus on the plant surface may lead to gene flow in a previously overlooked way, potentially leaking GM genes into the natural world."

The same *Agrobacterium* are used by genetic engineers to transfer genes into plants to produce GM varieties. GM companies use antibiotics to remove the

agrobacterium, but the Bristol study shows that this may need to be done much more rigorously since the mechanism operates in more life forms than just plants. A plant pathologist who worked on the study said, "If a plant is still carrying *Agrobacterium* and is planted out, not only other plants but also fungi could receive the new DNA."

"Since European society does not want to buy GMOs, we had better focus on other technology."

Marion Guillou, President of the National Institute for Agronomical Research in France on why their 1,800 scientists have scrapped all GM research.

INTERNATIONAL ROUNDUP

EU

The latest pan-EU Eurobarometer poll shows public concern about GM is on the rise, and that, contrary to industry claims, the technology is well understood. It showed 61% of Europeans are opposed to GM food, up from 58% in the 2007 poll, with 57% saying it benefits some but puts others at risk and less than one third saying they think it has an important economic role. Interestingly EFSA's press release of the findings highlighted public lack of confidence in public authorities, with 84% having confidence in information from doctors and 71% trusting environmental protection groups, but only 47% trusting national government and about half of respondents ignoring what they hear in the media about food.

Brussels

In October EFSA Chair Diana Benati resigned from the EU Board of Directors of the industry-funded International Life Sciences Institute after allegations of conflict of interest flared and Vice President of the EU Agriculture Committee Jose Bove called for her resignation saying, "The Commission should never have approved her appointment given her clear links to the food industry, which is completely at odds with the need for independence at the EFSA."

GM cultivation update

(see TI 15, 16 and 19) The legal service of the EU Council echoed previous legal criticism of the Commission's proposal to devolve decisions on GM cultivation to EU Member States, saying it has an "invalid legal basis" and is likely to be incompatible with both WTO and Single Market rules.

The finding reinforced Member State concerns about what reasons countries might actually use to ban GM cultivation that would not be challenged in court. The Commission is to draw up a list of grounds that could be applied, will redraft its proposal and bring it back for further discussion.

The French environment Minister said they would not discuss the proposal until "significant and clear progress" was made on outstanding recommendations from December 2008. Meanwhile a German federal constitutional court affirmed some of the world's most rigorous restrictions on farmers growing GM crops, including a mandatory public seed use disclosure and strict liability to "any loss in market

value" of others' crops or honey due to contamination. The court rejected a complaint that publishing GM field locations was a breach of privacy.

Zero tolerance update

(see TI 16) Commission proposals to permit unauthorised untested GMOs in feed imports was welcomed by the NFU but met with a mixed response from Member States. The UK is pressing for the proposal to be extended to permitting unauthorised GMOs into food as well as feed, so the Commission has asked for views on this before redrafting and bringing back to the table for further discussion.

France

In October the transnational Carrefour joined the ranks of European food companies telling their customers which products come from animals fed a non-GM diet with a clear label on some 300 products in France. The retailing giant said their research showed 63% of customers would stop eating food if they knew it came from animals fed GM, so they are helping shoppers get what they want.

Italy

In September a court fined a farmer 25,000 euros for growing GM maize and ordered the destruction of the crop. The country maintains a ban on GM cultivation pending approval of coexistence regulations.

Americas

US

In September the Sixth Circuit Court of Appeals overturned the last remaining US ban on voluntary labels on milk produced without GM growth hormones. The ruling challenges the FDA's position of "no significant difference" between such products, with the Court finding there is in fact a "compositional difference" including increased hormone and pus levels in milk, as well as lower nutritional value in the milk from GM-treated cows.

In November, an Oregon State University weed scientist accused Oregon and Federal officials of refusing to alert farmers and others of the discovery of a new GM weed, Roundup Ready bentgrass, along the banks of around nine miles of irrigation canals and in fields. She reported finding GM DNA in samples sent to her by farmers concerned they couldn't kill the weeds and asked both State and Federal

agencies to publicise the findings, but both refused, as did Scotts Co, the company who released the GM grass. The plants are believed to have escaped from 2005 tests of a GM bentgrass being developed for use on golf courses. Scotts has been seeking deregulation since 2003, and a spokesperson said, "We continue to have conversation with folks at APHIS and folks at USDA and hope to have it deregulated sooner rather than later." The USDA could fine the company for the escapes, however, as they did in 2007 when nine GM bentgrass plants escaped 2002 test fields leading to a US\$500,000 penalty.

GM salmon update

(see TI 19) In November *Science* published a Duke University study showing the process used by the FDA to review GM salmon gives "an incomplete picture" of the situation because it ignored economic and environmental impact, which the study says "could dwarf" differences in nutritional content. Consumer group Food and Water Watch released documents from the Department of the Interior in which federal wildlife officials express concern that the FDA may have violated the Endangered Species Act when it failed to consult the Fish and Wildlife Service about threats to endangered wild populations. The FDA says the fish will be raised in inland tanks, but scientists say this ignores evidence of previous escapes from such facilities to the wild that should be considered a "serious threat". The US approval process continues. Meanwhile Canadian activists asked Environment Canada to disclose whether or not it has begun a "confidential" environmental assessment of GM salmon and demanded public involvement, saying they have so far met with a refusal to answer direct requests for information. One spokesperson said, "It's ridiculous that Environment Canada refuses to even tell the public if it conducting an environmental assessment. Why is this top secret?"

GM rice contamination update

(see TI 13, 16 and 17) In December the US Court of Appeals accepted an *amicus curiae* brief from the USA Rice Federation submitted in support of rice farmers against Bayer's appeal of the jury findings against them for wilfully contaminating US rice supplies with an unauthorised GM variety. In October Bayer settled out of a suit in Texas

BT crops today – what happens tomorrow?

In October the USDA hailed a study showing Bt maize crops provide a so-called “halo effect” of “collateral benefits” in neighbouring fields claiming economic benefits of billions, including for non-GM farmers, as corn borer populations fell in fields adjacent to GM. Entomologist Bruce Tabashnik said, “It’s a great example of a technology working how it should.”

Not everyone is so convinced that the results of growing Bt are such a success overall. Researchers at the Chinese Academy of Agricultural Sciences have showed that as target pests in Bt cotton are killed off, other pests move in, finding, “Bt cotton could be responsible for the appearance and subsequent spread of non-target pests.” In India data compiled from the Directorate of Agriculture show that in Karnataka, “pesticide usage, including specifically insecticide usage in cotton, has actually been going up in the recent past even though Bt Cotton has spread rapidly in the state,” as well as a repeat of the increase in non-target insects

... use GM to solve one problem, and when it brings another, use more and different GM toxins.

“which is causing economic losses” for farmers.

Insects also develop resistance to Bt. As even the new US study says, farmers should grow refuges of non-GM “for sustainable insect resistance management”. Tabashnik wrote in *Science*, “Although refuges have probably helped Bt crops remain effective longer than expected some populations of at least four major pests have evolved resistance to Bt,” for which he advises “a wider array of toxins, including toxins genetically modified to counteract resistance.”

So we appear to be on the same old treadmill with GM as with chemical sprays: use GM to solve

one problem, and when it brings another, use more and different GM toxins. It is most interesting to note, therefore, that we may be wiser to use non-GM methods, often cheaper with fewer risks, and sometimes more effective. For instance, it is a frustration to GM scientists that the pink bollworm (a cotton pest acknowledged by Monsanto to be resistant to Bt in India) may well be eradicated from western USA and northern Mexico before their GM pink bollworm is approved for use. The GM pink bollworm, sterilised with radiation then genetically modified to contain a fluorescent marker gene to help track them, was first released in the US in 2006, but an eradication plan based on monitoring, traps, lures, pheromones, insecticide and releasing sterile moths, is “progressing as planned”. Reported bollworm captures in New Mexico are down to zero this year from 15 last year, and eight caught in 15 West Texas counties.

No GM, no resistance, no rise in other pests, no pink bollworm, proper long-lasting success.

brought by three farmers by agreeing to pay US\$290,000. A Bayer spokesperson said, “Bayer CropScience has always been willing to settle such biotech rice litigation cases on reasonable terms and is pleased to be able to do so in this instance.” Some 6,000 other claims remain.

GM sugar beet update

(see TI 16 and 19) In November APHIS issued a draft of the court-ordered Environmental Assessment of GM sugar beet, proposing special licenses and third-party scrutiny of GM beet farmers in an attempt to move toward next year’s sowing. Meanwhile a US District Judge ordered the destruction of a GM sugar beet crop on the grounds the USDA is “likely” to have breached the law in authorising the planting against a previous court order. He said any damage to the defendants was “only their own doing” for proceeding with planting

when then knew the permits to do so were “at issue” in the courts. A stay was issued on appeal to 23 December and again until 28 February, before the crop would flower but with more time for legal arguments to be made.

Australasia

Australia

Less than a year after the controversial decision to permit GM oilseed rape (OSR, or canola) cultivation (see TI 11, 13 and 16), the Agriculture Minister came under fire as tests revealed nearly two thirds of the OSR crop on a Western Australian organic farm, some 220 hectares, was contaminated up to 1.5 kilometres inside his land boundary by a neighbour’s GM OSR crop. The Minister had promised there would be no contamination if the country permitted the introduction of GM canola. The organic

farmer lost the organic certification for at least a year, saying, “Governments that allow GM canola to be grown must ensure whatever a farmer does within their boundary does not impact on neighbouring farms. But clearly, the technology can’t be contained.” Details are still emerging about the cause and impact of the incident, but it is believed the contamination was blown onto the organic land. Monsanto is reported to have offered legal support to the GM farmer against any compensation claims that may arise.

The Shadow Agriculture Minister said, “This is pitting farmer against farmer, neighbour against neighbour... There will be huge social ramifications for regional towns and communities when litigation between neighbours breaks out over contamination,” adding the Government had “ignored” warnings

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