

Thin Ice



the GM Freeze Campaign newsletter

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Illinois GM maize overwhelmed by early infestation

For the second year running the US GM maize crop is being attacked by rootworm, the pest the Bt crop is supposed to resist, and the difficulties appear to be more serious this year. The crop showed signs of emerging pest resistance in six states last year. Reports began to emerge as early as June this year that unusually heavy rootworm infestations are causing heavy damage to crops in Illinois following a mild Winter, early Spring and a hatch out that came a month early.

An entomologist from the University of Illinois said there are an “amazing” number of rootworm “severely

pruning” a crop he saw on land that had been planted “corn on corn” continuously for 10 years, and the Bt variety for six consecutive years, fostering increased resistance in the pests.

Monsanto are said to be studying

Rootworm infestations are causing heavy damage to crops

rootworms collected from the fields in question and has sent specialists to Illinois, Iowa, Nebraska, Minnesota, South

Dakota and Kansas to look for signs of trouble. The company advises farmers to search their fields early to look for signs of infestation and is planning clinics to help corn on corn farmers manage what emerges in their fields.

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Africa

Burkina Faso

GM cotton cultivation in Burkina Faso is frequently held up as an example of how GM technology can help small farmers in Africa. However in May news emerged that Burkinabe cotton farmers have abandoned GM cotton this season in favour of conventional varieties. GM's failure to meet promised 30% yield increases is cited, as well as a more surprising decrease in fibre quality in what was harvested driving down prices 10%.

Sudan

In June the Chair of the Board of Cotton in the General Secretariat of Agricultural Revival criticised the Ministry of Agriculture for importing GM cotton seed, which has been sowed, in what he suggested was a criminal breach of the Biosafety Act. He emphasised Sudan's reliance on exports and called the move a significant risk to those markets.

Zambia

In June former Agriculture Minister Mundia Sikatana passed away and was hailed by the current Vice President as “a fearless voice of reason who

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GET ACTIVE

A ban needed not guidelines

European authorities are consulting on new safety guidelines for food from GM animals – a clear precursor to approving such products for commercial sale. No food from GM animals is authorised in any country anywhere, and the market rejects it. Where research on GM animals has been done, tests have been largely unsuccessful and abandoned (see **Canada** inside).

Write to your MEPs today asking why time and money are being spent on such speculative work when a ban would be much more sensible.

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executed selfless service for the nation” who stood up to pressure when it was “unfashionable” to do so. Sikatana’s stand is worth a memorial as he was at the helm during the 2002 food shortages and led Zambia’s rejection of the GM food aid being pressed on the country by USAID. Zambia’s position prompted a global storm of pro-GM indignation and recrimination. There are no regrets in Zambia, as the Vice President told mourners, “If today as a nation we seem to speak out more freely when we see acts of injustice being committed, it is partly because of the courage of moral giants like him... He carried out this difficult task with distinction, while ensuring that not a single Zambian life was lost due to lack of access to natural, non-GM maize.” In March the Government ruled out GM import and cultivation citing the need to protect health, the environment and small farmers. Zambia continues to promote its policy of crop diversification.

Americas

Brazil

In June Monsanto learned it may have to pay as much as US\$7.5 billion to some five million Brazilian soy farmers after the Supreme Court ruled that the royalty fees it charges soy producers is unjust and the patent involved had expired. The so-called “Monsanto tax” was levied on soy production because farmers save seed, but a group of soy producers claimed it is unfair because Brazilian law permits seed saving and because Monsanto’s requirement to maintain strict segregation of GM and non-GM soy, even if both are Monsanto products, is unfeasible due to cross-pollination and co-mingling. Illegal GM soy production began in Brazil in the late 1990s after seeds were smuggled into the country from Argentina. The crop was subsequently legalised, but royalty payments have long been an issue. Monsanto is expected to appeal the order to cease royalty collections and return royalty payments dating back to 2004.

Canada

In April the University of Guelph announced the closure of the GM Enviropig project (See TI 18) when its industry partner pulled financial support. No alternative backers came forward, and the piglets were destroyed in June.

Also in April the biotech company developing a GM pharma safflower crop to produce cardiovascular drugs and insulin began an “orderly wind down” of operations as Chinese backers pulled financial support. SemBioSys had been struggling since the 2010 layoff of its staff. In 2009 AquaBounty, the company currently facing financial difficulties as it attempts to get a GM salmon approved in the US, had pulled out of a SemBioSys project to develop a safflower producing drugs to aid shrimp farming.

Chile

In March the Transparency Council ruled against a biotech industry appeal and insisted that the location of all GM seed production for export, the only legal GM cultivation, must be publicly available. The decision enables farmers, beekeepers and rural residents to know where GM is being grown and protect themselves and their businesses from contamination. In January the Transparency Council had called a unique public hearing for GM companies to present their arguments. No companies attended, but beekeepers did. They said that if they had no idea where GM crops were being grown they could not keep their bees from collecting GM pollen, leading to contaminated honey. They pointed out this has, “[I]mplications on labelling, presentation and advertising of these products and merchandising, meaning great losses for national honey producers.” Meanwhile no progress has been reported in the EU on implementing the ECJ ruling that GM honey needs a GM label.

Paraguay

In June President Lugo was impeached in what is widely believed to be a coup planned by multinational agribusinesses

and local land barons. An attempted eviction of peasants peacefully occupying land on the Brazilian border that resulted in 17 deaths and dozens of injuries was used as the pretext for the action, and the President was given just two hours to mount his defence. Human rights activists claim the violence was orchestrated by police to smear the President. Riot police using horses and water canon had to quell public protests after the impeachment. Argentina, Ecuador and Venezuela announced refusal to recognise the new Government, Argentina and Brazil withdrew their ambassadors and Bolivia, Nicaragua and Chile lodged complaints. The MERCOSUR trade group suspended the new Government’s membership and banned it from meetings.

Peasants fear their way of life is being criminalised and food sovereignty undermined. The Lugo government initiated a system of social protections to alleviate extreme poverty, including building homes and providing 1.5 million people with health care, as well as reversing privatisation of key utilities. Land reforms lead to violence as policies attempted to redress the fact the 2% of the population control over 75% of the country’s land, yet the 40% of the population operating small-scale farms control a mere 5%. Critics allege the coup was designed to secure a right-wing victory in the 2013 Presidential elections and that the Attorney General, Judiciary, National Police and various government agencies are all controlled by cooperation agreements with USAID. Most of Paraguay’s GM soy continues to fuel Europe’s factory farms.

US

In March a University of Pittsburg study demonstrated sublethal doses of Roundup caused two species of amphibian tadpoles to change shape in a way that mimics natural responses to high stress levels, potentially putting them at a competitive disadvantage. It is the first study to show that a pesticide can induce morphological changes in vertebrates. The study author said, “Herbicides are not designed to affect animals, but we are learning that they can have a wide range of surprising effects by altering how hormones work in the bodies of animals. This is important because amphibians not only serve as a barometer of the ecosystem’s health, but also as an indicator of potential dangers to

“Much of the information only shows what they, pioneers of GMOs, want you to know and not what you want to see.”

Zambia Open University acting dean of students Mwananyanda Mbikusita-Lewanika

other species in the food chain, including humans.”

In April a Portland State University study showed the Bt toxin used in GM crops harms the health of soil ecosystems. The toxins impeded the growth of soil fungi (arbuscular mycorrhizal fungi, or AMF) key to a symbiotic relationship with most plants. The study, covering 14 different Bt and non-Bt lines, showed the presence of Bt inhibits the fungi bonding with corn roots. The report said, “Transgenic Bt maize plants had lower levels of AMF colonization in their roots than did the non-Bt parental base-hybrids. This work contributes to the growing body of knowledge on the unanticipated effects of Bt crop cultivation on non-target soil organisms.”

In May a national weed “summit” heard that the superweed problem faced by farmers on 20 million acres (according to Dow) may be more difficult to control than initially believed. A crop consultant from Arkansas said, “This is our number one issue. It is a challenge every day, every field.” A joint report from the USDA and the Weed Science Society of America said, “A significant proportion of growers are not practicing adequate proactive herbicide resistance management,” and that this is making the problem worse every year. A USDA agronomist said it will be at least 20 years before any new chemicals are available to help. As a result the biotech industry is resorting to older products, such as dicamba and 2,4D, to get them out of the mess they have created.

Also in May the former Georgian Minister of Economics poured US\$8 million into the cash-strapped AquaBounty company still waiting for a White House decision on its GM salmon. The injection is thought to be sufficient to keep the company afloat until the end of 2012 after 15 of its 27 staff were laid off.

In June a paragraph was introduced into a draft Bill proposing that GM crops can be grown while court cases are underway to prevent such cultivation. Critics call the move a muzzle on Federal Judges because it would prevent them issuing injunctions while cases on safety are being decided. Such injunctions have been frequently used to challenge GM authorisations.

Australasia

Australia

In April Monsanto was clinging to its market by offering farmers a buy-three-get-one-free deal on its canola (oilseed rape) seed. Grain traders reported selling non-

“Farmers know the economics of GM canola do not add up. Many who tried out the GM crop in previous years have decided to grow other more profitable and productive varieties instead.”

Bob Phelps of Gene Ethics on the GM oilseed rape market in Australia

GM seed at an AU\$50/tonne premium, while one trader was selling GM seed at an AU\$30/tonne discount. Monsanto’s proposal to limit losses for New South Wales farmers to AU\$10/tonne if they sell their crop in advance and deliver it to Cargill has prompted suggestions that this might be illegal price fixing. GM canola is reported to yield AU\$150 per hectare less profit than non-GM.

India

In May the National Biodiversity Authority confirmed it will launch a criminal biopiracy prosecution against Monsanto/Mayco for using six local varieties of brinjal (eggplant) from Karnataka to create their GM Bt brinjal without seeking the required advanced permission.

In June the Federation of Tamil Nadu Rice Mill Owners and Rice Dealers Association wrote to the Ministry of Commerce, the Genetic Engineering Appraisal Committee (GEAC) and others demanding “all the necessary steps” are taken to prevent GM research on rice in order to prevent contamination of the biodiversity the economy relies on. Government investment in research for wide-scale adoption of agroecology is their preferred approach. As of April at least 11 of India’s 28 States refuse to permit GM trials. The GEAC wrote to all State governments to emphasise the importance of GM crops and of using a case-by-case evaluation instead of blanket bans.

Also in June a two-day conference launching a 10-year review of Bt cotton cultivation heard a wide variety of serious concerns including:

- The high uptake of Bt cotton.
- Growing levels of “distress” among the majority of cotton farmers (including among the 65% of farmers in rain-fed regions, for whom Bt cotton has failed).
- “Near complete agreement” that Bt costs more to cultivate than non-GM.
- Initial pesticide reductions lost to a “steady increase” of a “dangerous cocktail” of pesticide and fertiliser use.
- The need for further safety assessments given the high volume of Bt cotton in food and feed.
- The lack of a liability or labelling

regime and the concentration of the seed market with Monsanto leading to the increasing “redundancy” of public sector research and waste of public funding on contamination and compensation to farmers for failed crops.

The conference heard repeatedly about safer, cheaper, more sustainable ecological options and that the Government should create a level playing field between these and intensive agricultural technologies.

Europe

In May the Parliament called on the European Patent Office to stop granting patents on conventional plant and animal breeding. Last-minute attempts by Syngenta to delay the vote were unsuccessful. New legislation will be needed if the EPO does not cease granting such patents. No Patents on Seeds believes corporations like Monsanto, Dupont, Syngenta and Bayer are increasingly abusing current patent laws in order to gain monopoly control over global food production chains.

In June the Danish Presidency failed to secure sufficient support to progress Commission proposals for devolved decision making on GM cultivation. Member States remain unconvinced of the legal protections on offer and fear lawsuits if they attempt bans.

France

In May EFSA ruled there is “no specific evidence” to substantiate the reinstated ban on cultivating Monsanto’s GM MON810 maize. (See TI 25) The EFSA scientific opinion said some of the documentation provided by the French had already been rejected and in the rest EFSA “could not identify any new science-based evidence indicating that maize MON 810 cultivation in the EU poses a significant and imminent risk to the human and animal health or the environment”. There is no indication France will lift the ban.

Italy

In April a farmer was put on trial for planting 12 acres of MON810 maize in 2010 and stating he would do so again

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in 2012 without authorisation from the Ministry of Agriculture and without appropriate coexistence measures in place. The farmer contends he acted within EU law and the more strict Italian provisions breach this. One field was destroyed by protesters (Greenpeace was fined €86,000) and harvested maize and equipment were seized by the authorities to be either returned or destroyed according to the court's judgement, which is expected around November.

Germany

In May a farmer launched a criminal case against Syngenta over the death of 65 cows fed the company's GM Bt176 maize (no longer approved) and resulting losses of over €500,000. Charges claim Syngenta's German Director knew of a 1996 US feeding trial that was abandoned when four cows died within two days of being fed the GM crop, and the company had a legal obligation to disclose this information to customers, as well as to lodge the deaths as "unexpected occurrences" with the relevant authorities, neither of which was done. Charges also claim Syngenta testified at a previous case the company knew of no risks related to using BT176 as feed.

Hungary

In June Parliament unanimously approved new restrictions on cultivating GM crops authorised by the EU.

Poland

In April a ban was introduced on Monsanto's GM MON810 maize after a demonstration by some 1,500 beekeepers and supporters dumped dead bees at the steps of the Ministry of Agriculture. The Agriculture Minister said, "The decree is in the works. It introduces a complete ban on the MON810 strain of maize in Poland."

Switzerland

In May GM oilseed rape was discovered growing along transport routes near Basel port. Switzerland has had a ban on GM imports since 2005.

Turkey

In April the Agriculture Minister authorised labels for products from animals fed a GM diet. Meat, milk, eggs, cheese and other products derived from animals fed GM will now carry labels to ensure consumers can choose to avoid them. This is far stronger than the voluntary labels operating in

EFSA: Conflicts of interest force budget postponement

IN MAY the Parliament adopted a report from the Budget Committee postponing approval of EFSA's 2010 budget, with the report author saying, "[C]onflicts of interest could ... have a negative impact on the impartiality of the decision-making process and also on the citizens' trust in the institutions." The postponement enables the Parliament to take into account an upcoming report by the European Court of Auditors on conflicts of interest at EFSA after long-running battles over revolving doors between the Authority and biotech

industry, which EFSA admitted it had not acted to stop.

Two days before the vote Diana Banati, Chair of EFSA's management board, was forced to resign with immediate effect because of her decision to take up a full-time position with the International Life Sciences Institute in Washington.

Green MEP José Bové said, "The presence of key staff and board members with direct links to the food industry is not acceptable. Ms Bánáti's resignation is a first step to cleaning up the agency."

some EU Member States identifying products from animals fed a non-GM diet and could present a problem to be resolved as Turkey's application to join the EU is considered.

UK

In April the Scottish farmer at the centre of the 2010 controversy over the use of cloning in the food chain announced he has abandoned clones. There was no market for any of the milk produced, nor was there sufficient market for the animals to be sold to other farms. A spokesperson for Simon Holstein UK, which keeps breed records for milking cows, said, "There is no future for cloned farm animals if you look at the public reaction...Farmers do not want lots of copies of the same animal for either breeding or food. They are constantly looking to improve the animals they have on farms."

In May a report from the Environmental

Audit Committee challenged the Government's "sustainable intensification" model for food production, questioned the meaning of the phrase in practice and questioned Government support for GM saying it had received evidence that food shortages could be "better addressed through other means". The Committee called on the Government to evaluate the impacts of GM cultivation, particularly in relation to co-existence with non-GM and organic crops, with the Chair saying, "Until there is clear public acceptance of GM and it is proven to be beneficial, the Government should not license its commercial use in the UK nor promote its use overseas." A Committee report states the UK does not have an overarching food strategy or the basic science base to deliver more sustainable food production practices, and that relying on markets to identify the relevant research is likely to fail.

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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