

Thin Ice



the GM Freeze Campaign newsletter

Issue 30, July 2013

Cameron Government's new GM sales pitch

As predicted last year after revelations that a high-level Government meeting with the biotech industry agreed a strategy to secure public acceptance of GM food and crops, the Coalition Government launched a strong new pro-GM push this Spring.

In April the new Chief Scientific Advisor Mark Walport used his first public statement to repeat well-rehearsed myths, including that GM crops are needed to “feed the world”, that it “is showing its value more and more” and questioning the true level of public opposition to the technology.

Walport was correct in his assertion that public opposition to GM hampers its uptake and that, “The final decision is a political decision,” but this may not have been especially helpful to the Government as the political decision in Wales and Scotland remains firmly against. In May a Motion in the Scottish Parliament “condemned the UK Government’s proposal to ask the EU to ease the restrictions on the cultivation of GM crops”.

Walport’s efforts were followed in June by a speech by Defra Secretary of State Owen Paterson listing a long string of dubious, outdated or disproved claims for GM crops, insisting, “At the moment Europe is missing out,” and the UK should be “at forefront of the global race, not watching from the sidelines”. The speech was heavily trailed in the press with a Government call for a “relaxation” of EU GM regulations, and it neatly echoed the industry’s position – in an interview on 17 May EuropaBio

spokesperson Natalie Moll said, “The Ag biotech industry needs legislation that works ... On agricultural biotechnology we’re losing completely out in Europe ... We’re here to help.”

The EU does have GM legislation, and it does “work”, even if GM

“Any half-way decent GM enthusiast with a scientific background would have blushed during much of the speech... I think he’s falling into a trap over GM, and I don’t think he understands the issue.”

Conservative MP Zac Goldsmith on Defra Chief Owen Paterson

companies don’t like the results. Whether or not GM crops themselves work is another matter. As superweeds spread rapidly and superinsects emerge, Monsanto’s most recent results show a 37% jump in sales for its herbicide unit, but a 2% drop in soyabean seed sales, a 7% drop in vegetable seed sales and a 9% drop in cottonseed and trait sales. GM companies, whose promise of reduced chemical use Owen Paterson repeated, will continue to rely heavily on chemical sales well into the future.

Paterson’s speech caused at least as many problems as it solved for Number 10. Press reports revealed that caterers in Parliament do not use GM products, boosting the “us and them”

impression left by the Government’s pro-GM stance. The Prime Minister had to be pressed repeatedly on whether or not his family eats GM before he said he was “perfectly happy” if they do. The Deputy PM, however, said he “does not knowingly” feed his children GM food, adding, “I take science-based precautionary approach ... you have got to approach it cautiously ... That is what the EU has been doing for some years now.” Coupled with the rejection of the technology in Scotland and Wales, the basis for the “UK” pro-GM position aiming for altered EU regulation remains a mystery.

Minister of State for Business, Innovation and Skills David Willetts evaded Parliamentary questions from Conservative MP Zac Goldsmith in June. Asked what meetings the Minister has had with scientists and the biotech industry about GM approvals and cultivation he said, “Authorising the planting of GM crops is a matter for the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, my right hon. Friend Mr Paterson.” Goldsmith called Paterson’s speech “nonsense”, saying, “He’s swallowed the industry line hook, line and sinker without talking to anyone with a different view. When designing policy that’s a dangerous thing, and I’m concerned big business is framing the debate for the government ... The story so far suggests that GM is predominantly about the industry getting greater control over the food chain, rather than alleviating poverty or

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INTERNATIONAL ROUNDUP

Africa

Kenya

In April the Nairobi-based US agricultural office attempted to erode the country's resistance to GM food aid at the same time as the Government seeks to import 600,000 metric tonnes of maize in an attempt to control rising staple prices. Several groups pressing for an end to the GM ban, including the Africa Biotechnology Stakeholders Forum, Biotechnology Trust Africa and the notorious International Service for the Acquisition of Agri-biotech Applications, claim that permitting GM will reduce food prices and cut the country's import bill by some 20%. In fact the move may have as much to do with the 50% tariff imposed on maize imports from countries outside the local trade blocs (the East African Community and Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa). Rather than attempting to use countries with food shortages as outlets for surplus US GM production, this "problem" can be avoided by donating cash, which has the added benefit of boosting regional markets and economies in Tanzania, Uganda and Zambia by buying their non-GM crops.

Americas

Brazil

In May the Supreme Court unanimously confirmed previous rulings that Monsanto's attempts to extend its patent on GM soybeans were illegal. [TI 29] The 2012 class action case demanded an end to the company's ongoing collections of royalties and technology use fees claiming these were illegal since the patent expired in 2010. The Vice President of the Association of Soy Producers (APROSOJA) said, "The Supreme Court has put an end to the persistent decision by Monsanto to violate the law. The firm position of the [Supreme Court] proves that we are on track and have won our rights."

Canada

A survey of over 2,000 farmers published in May suggested that over one million acres of Canadian farmland are now infested with glyphosate resistant weeds

caused by overreliance on Roundup in GM cultivation. A scientist at Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada said, "That's probably an underestimate," adding that as resistance spreads weed control will become increasingly more expensive and complicated, especially under conservation tillage.

Also in May the Pest Management Regulatory Agency became the world's first to authorise Dow AgroSciences' new "Enlist Duo" herbicide, which contains 2,4-D, in an attempt to control superweeds. New GM Enlist maize and soya are already approved in Canada, although in May the USDA unexpectedly announced it will conduct further scrutiny of both 2-4,D and dicamba resistant GM crops. Dow AgroSciences' North America Vice President said, "Managing hard-to-control and resistant weeds is one of the biggest problems farmers are facing, and Enlist is a solution they need to continue moving farming forward." How effective this "solution" will be, and how long it will last, remains to be seen.

US

GM fish update: In April US activists used a Freedom of Information request to uncover documents showing that the FDA limited its paltry environmental assessment to examining impacts in Canada and Panama. This enabled a finding of "no significant impact" on the US environment despite the fact that the agency was already in receipt of applications to authorise US imports of GM salmon eggs for domestic fish production. The Center for Food Safety suggests that perhaps "the whole idea of growing the GM salmon in Panama was a regulatory ruse by the company designed to get approval, while their real intent was to sell the eggs to US companies to be grown in US facilities". A new Congressional Bill is attempting to prohibit the shipment, sale, transportation, purchase, possession or release of GM salmon until a full environmental impact statement finds it would result in no significant impact to the environment. More than 1.5 million people have written to FDA opposing the approval of the fish, and supermarket chains with more than 2,500 shops say they will avoid the salmon if it is commercialised.

In May GM wheat used in trials in 2005 was found in an Oregon field. Japan, the largest buyer of US wheat (3 million tonnes annually), cancelled existing bids and halted imports of the wheat type. South Korean millers also suspended imports, Europe intensified testing, and China, Taiwan and the Philippines went on alert. Oregon farmers, who export 90% of their crop, feared a repeat of the 2006 contamination of US rice supplies that halted business for years. By June Monsanto claimed the contamination was an "isolated incident" and the Canadian Wheat Board said there is a "need for world trade to accommodate a low level presence of foreign material" (ie, unapproved, untested GMOs) to prevent disruptions in international trade, apparently forgetting that commercialisation of GM wheat was blocked by Canadian farmers fearing precisely this situation arising. Monsanto responded to two lawsuits, including a class action, saying, "Tractor-chasing lawyers have prematurely filed suit without any evidence of fault and in advance of the crop's harvest... Given the care undertaken, no legal liability exists and the company will present a vigorous defense." By July headlines proclaimed plans to resume Japanese imports, but the key to this, a validated testing method, is still not in place, and the source of the contamination is still unknown. The UK open-air field trial of GM wheat continues and was extended to permit an Autumn-sown crop in a matter of days after the Oregon story broke.

Australasia

India

In June the Maharashtra State Agriculture Minister said of Bt cotton, "In the long run, we want to eradicate it because it is water-intensive and utterly unsuited to our conditions." The State has finally banned GM cottonseed sales, but only for a season, with the Minister saying, "The company [Mayco/Monsanto] was cheating innocent cotton farmers by supplying substandard seeds and was involved in black marketing by creating artificial shortage of supplies. So we had banned it... Next season they will have to

come back to seek renewal of the licence afresh... Bt cotton is grown in states like Andhra Pradesh and Gujarat too. If we want a complete ban, then we will have to take other states into confidence."

In July the Intellectual Property Appellate Board of India dismissed Monsanto's appeal against the rejection of its patent application for stress tolerant GM plants able to withstand increased heat, salt or drought. The patent office found the application "lacked an inventive step", was the "mere application" of a previously known plant property and "included essential biological process of regeneration and selection", all of which make it unpatentable.

Philippines

In May the Court of Appeals ordered a halt to ongoing field trials of Bt talong (aubergine) saying they pose risks to human health and the environment that violates the constitutional right to a balanced and healthful ecology. The Court ordered the Respondents, including USAID, to rehabilitate the areas affected and ruled that the Government failed to adopt sufficient biosafety protocols in conducting the trials noting, "[C]onsidering the irreversible effects that the field trials, and eventually the introduction of Bt talong to the market, could possibly bring we could not take chances."

Europe

In May EFSA's Scientific Committee "raised concern about the usefulness" of a two-year €3 million study planned by DG Research and Innovation on long-term carcinogenicity in rodents fed with the GM maize NK601. The move followed criticism of the short-term nature of the current testing protocols that emerged in the wake of the 2012 findings of CRIIGEN. (TI 27, 29)

In May Monsanto announced a halt to its EU GM lobbying operations, then in July the company said it would withdraw at least seven applications for EU authorisation to cultivate new GM crops. A company spokesperson said, "As the EU today is effectively a conventional seed market we have been progressively de-emphasising cultivation of biotech crops in Europe... We intend to withdraw pending

regulatory applications for commercial cultivation of new biotech crops in the EU... Instead, we will focus on enabling imports of biotech crops into the EU and the growth of our current business there." While some celebrated Monsanto's "retreat" from the EU, others pointed out that GM MON810 maize is still likely to be grown in a few EU countries, and EU reliance on GM imports for animal feed and biofuels mean the damage done by GM crops to ecosystems and human health will continue elsewhere.

Hungary

In May the Minister for Rural Development announced that 500 hectares of GM maize were burned to prevent pollen escape as the country moves to eliminate GM production. Hungarian farmers, who have lost a year's harvest, claim they did not know the seed they used was GM and are concerned they will not be compensated as the company that distributed the GM seeds has gone bankrupt.

Ireland

In June Teagasc announced the second phase of its EU-funded GM potato trial at the Oakpark crop research centre in Carlow. Some 5,274 potatoes will be planted on two acres, including one third GM, one third conventional and one third organic blight resistant Sarpo Mira. The Amiga project, of which this trial is a part, has partners in 15 EU Member States researching the impacts of GM plants on agricultural ecosystems. The Teagasc study will assess the impact of the GM potato on soil microbes, and Amiga partners in Germany and the Netherlands will use the Oakpark site to assess impacts of GM planting on insects, including bumblebees. Opposition to the trials continues.

Turkey

In April the Biosecurity Board banned the import of 26 GMOs, including sugar beet and oilseed rape, amid ongoing accusations and denials that GM rice was imported illegally. Previously executives of three food companies were detained over allegations about GM rice imports, which had prompted US officials to say Turkey should change its GM regulations, but the facts of the case have yet to emerge.

"The promises of GM industry have not come true for European agriculture, nor have they for the agriculture in developing and emerging economies."

German Agriculture Ministry

EU legal news

● MON810 reauthorisation

In March the European Network of Scientists for Social and Environmental Responsibility joined a challenge at the European Court of Justice of the Commission's 2012 import authorisation for a Monsanto GM Roundup Ready soyabean. The group claims EFSA did not carry out the required risk assessment and seeks enforcement of requirement under Directive 2001/18 and 1829/2003 that GM crops should only be authorised after undergoing scientific evaluation of the highest possible standards.

● GM animals and insects

In March GeneWatch UK called for the suspension of new rules for companies wishing to apply to release GM animals. The group says the rules cannot come into force until the European Ombudsman completes an investigation into conflicts of interest among seven members of EFSA's Working Group on GM insects, including an Oxford University researcher paid by the UK Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council to work with UK company Oxitec to develop GM insect regulations. Oxitec is seeking commercialisation of GM insects, and Oxford University's investment in Oxitec means it would profit from any commercial releases.

● EFSA conflicts of interest:

In March the EU Ombudsman ruled that EFSA failed to take adequate measures to prevent conflict of interests arising from the notorious 2008 "revolving doors" case in which Suzy Renckens moving directly from her job as head of the EFSA unit responsible for the risk assessment of GM plants to a top EU lobbying position at Syngenta.

Cameron Government's GM sales pitch

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environmental concerns.”

Apart from the factual difficulties with Paterson's speech, it is also unclear what the UK Government thinks it can do to increase GM adoption rates in the EU. Given that eight EU Member States ban Monsanto's MON810 maize cultivation and the growing number of self-declared GM-free regions in the EU, it seems highly unlikely there is sufficient appetite to “relax” EU GM controls, so the timing of the push suggests Mr Cameron and Mr Patterson hope to create a role for themselves facilitating a new EU appreciation of GM as part of new US/EU trade talks.

The tide is against them. Questions remain as to why UK supermarkets are unable to access the plentiful supplies of non-GM soya needed to reinstate requirements for non-GM feed use when Brazil alone can meet increasing non-GM demand in both India and China. Africans don't want GM however much UK Government policy hopes to boost its economy by developing biotech crops for them. Pre-empting the UK's Agri-tech Strategy African civil society organisations published a scathing

“African agriculture is in need of support and investment... Africa is seen as a possible new frontier to make profits... The recent investment wave must be understood in the context of consolidation of a global food regime dominated by large corporations... The private companies are not acting on their own. They are using investment-friendly government policies and plans to advance their agenda.”

Statement from African civil society “Modernising African Agriculture: Who benefits?”

critique of European schemes for overseas agriculture, calling it a “new wave of colonialism” and saying, “These technologies produce concentration of land ownership, increasing economies of scale (production has to be at a large scale to get into and stay in markets), and a declining number of food producing households in a context of limited other livelihood options ... In most sub-Saharan African countries, agriculture is the primary economic activity for between 50% and 90% of the population. The practical results of the recent surge in investment in African

agriculture expose the empty rhetoric of African food security.” So much for an EU GM renaissance supporting deployment of the technology in the South.

Government's job is to represent the wishes of the people. Paterson said on the influential Conservative Home website, “The last poll I saw in Germany 98% of people are opposed to GM, so you have to really respect that.” His assertions that the Government needs to “explain” GM to UK citizens to “reassure” us of its “benefits” feel rather less than respectful.

“A recent decision to allow poultry providing the supermarket [Tesco] with eggs to be fed with GM grain was also a wrong move, seen as making it harder for shoppers to exercise choice in a way that feels uncomfortable ... While Tesco provides a sort of constrained convenience, in reality it has a business model that leaves us all poorer and the economy less resilient, by sucking spending and social contact out of communities, by hollowing out supply chains and leaving clone towns and ghost towns in their wake.”

Andrew Simms in The Guardian

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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