

Thin Ice



the GM Freeze Campaign newsletter

Issue 34, July 2014

UK Govt. under fire for breaking promise with Scotland on GM

Keen GM advocate Owen Paterson, then Defra Secretary of State, did not tell his European counterparts that Scotland is opposed to GM crop cultivation during recent discussions on so-called national opt-outs for approved GM crops. Scottish Environment Minister Paul Wheelhouse said he was “very disappointed” that Paterson did not honour his agreement to express Scotland’s support for regional autonomy on GM cultivation at the EU Council meeting in March. [TI 30]

Quizzed by the Scottish Parliament’s Rural Affairs Committee, Paterson admitted he made the agreement and that it was “unfortunate” he read the wrong speaking note during the meeting itself. Wheelhouse said, “This was the one thing that both the Scottish Government and our counterparts in the Welsh Assembly Government wanted raised, yet Mr Paterson didn’t mention

This was the one thing that the Scottish Government wanted raised.

it. This makes a mockery of the claim that Scotland is properly represented in Brussels by Westminster.”

Rural Affairs Committee Chair Rob Gibson accused Paterson of taking a “selfish negotiating stance” saying, “How can our Ministers trust any UK Government Minister who says he will take their views into account but when it comes to crunch negotiations ignores previous pledges?” A Defra spokesperson was reported to say that UK Ministers are “usually successful” in

representing Scotland’s views in the EU.

Shortly afterwards documents released by GeneWatch UK revealed collusion between the UK Government and the GM industry on a media strategy, including creating a blacklist of journalists who had written negative stories about the technology, to convince sceptical consumers of the benefits of GM foods. Those discussions were part of a wider strategy to relax European regulations on growing GM crops and to spend millions of pounds of taxpayers’ money on GM research in British fields.

GeneWatch UK Director said, “Ministers and officials are not acting in the public interest but colluding with the industry to push ahead with commercial plantings of Roundup Ready GM crops and undermine EU safety laws”. True to form the UK voted in favour of the legally flawed opt-out proposal at the EU Council on 12 June.

Many thanks to a GM Freeze supporter for sending this photo. He tells us, “The Government says there are ‘safeguards’ in place to prevent contamination of organic crops by GM varieties. I run a small livestock farm in Wiltshire.

“To the best of my knowledge no oilseed rape is grown within a mile of my property. I am pretty sure that the plant in the foreground of this photograph (taken yesterday on the terrace of my cottage) is oilseed rape, growing in a crack in the paving. How did it get there? Surely this suggests that the Government’s safeguards are meaningless.” Interesting point.



GET ACTIVE

Ask Liz Truss

In July Prime Minister David Cameron’s Cabinet reshuffle removed Owen Paterson as Defra Secretary of State and replaced him with Liz Truss, who was previously Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Education.

Please write to Ms Truss now and ask about her position on GM food and crops at defra.helpline@defra.gsi.gov.uk or by post to: Defra, Nobel House, 17 Smith Square, London SW1P 3JR

INTERNATIONAL ROUNDUP

Africa

African markets have long been targets for the GM industry. Work Monsanto has done recently to secure these markets includes:

Kenya

In May Monsanto announced it plans to introduce GM drought-resistant maize within two years. Company Vice President Michael Frank told an agribusiness workshop in Nairobi that work is being finalised on a variety aimed at farmers in arid and semi-arid areas that promises pest resistance and high yields.

Nigeria

In May Frank said Monsanto should invest in transforming the country's agriculture, saying, "We have been in Africa for 40 years and never established our presence in Nigeria, but a number of visits had been made, and we feel now that this is the right time to come to Nigeria, to make investments, develop partnerships, and help small-scale farmers here in Nigeria ... A lot of people ask about biotechnology or genetically modified organisms, and that is [a] definite part of our business. Biotechnology is a technology that helps farmers to farm efficiently and do it [in an] environmentally sustainable way."

South Africa

In November vocally pro-GM EU Chief Scientific Advisor Anne Glover will speak at the International Symposium on the Biosafety of Genetically Modified Organisms organised by the International Society for Biosafety Research. The organisation says, "The goal of the symposium is to advance the standing of biosafety research around the world and shape the ways in which GM technology is applied and regulated." Joining Monsanto as event sponsors are Bayer, DuPont/Pioneer, Syngenta, Dow and CropLife.

Americas

Argentina

In June a report by the Ministry of Health in Cordoba province showed that over five years the highest rate of deaths from cancerous tumours, double the national average, occur in areas where GM crops and agrochemicals are used. The University Network for Environment and Health demanded a number of immediate measures

to protect the population, including the prohibition of aerial spraying. A doctor and Professor of Social and Environmental Health at the Faculty of Medical Sciences in Rosario said, "The study of Cordoba matches the surveys we conducted in eighteen industrial agriculture areas. Cancer has skyrocketed in the last fifteen years... [Government and industry] keep demanding studies on something that is already proven and do not take urgent measures to protect the population. There is ample evidence that the agricultural model has health consequences, we are talking about a production model that is a huge public health problem." The University Network for Environment and Health added, "The tobacco companies denied the link between smoking and cancer, and took decades to recognise the truth. The biotech and agrochemical corporations are the same as the tobacco industry, they lie and favour business over the health of the population."

Brazil

In May the Mato Grosso Cotton Institute expressed concern about the rise in caterpillar resistance in the GM varieties that make up 80% of the region's crop. Some reports suggest insecticide costs for some farmers rose as much as 45% this season.

In July civil society groups in the UK and Brazil sounded the alarm about an upswing in Dengue Fever cases in a town where UK Company Oxitec released GM mosquitoes, which were promised to eradicate the disease. Field trial results have not been published and in any case did not evaluate the relation between the target *Aedes aegypti* mosquito populations and the occurrence of Dengue. Yet Moscamed, the group breeding the GM mosquitoes and monitoring population levels, announced *Aedes aegypti* mosquito numbers were reduced by 81-100% in at least two localities, claiming that this meant the experiments were a success. During the recent evaluation of the application for commercial release of the GM mosquitoes the Brazilian regulator presented a report that questioned the impact of the GM mosquitoes on the

incidence of Dengue and warned that in some circumstances the releases could make the disease worse, even if the number of wild *Aedes aegypti* mosquitoes was reduced. Commercialisation was authorised regardless.

Oxitec's other ventures are meeting with mixed results. In June health authorities in Pakistan met with Oxitec representatives, who claimed success in Brazil, about the potential use of GM mosquitoes for Dengue eradication. In July Malaysia's Malacca State Chief Minister said effectiveness, not cost, was the prime consideration in releasing GM mosquitoes: "We have no problem regarding the cost of its implementation. It's just that we fear if the mosquitoes are released, the situation may not improve, but instead worsen."

Mexico

In April a Mexican judge upheld an injunction issued last October halting testing and commercial planting of GM maize, including the cessation of ongoing operations. [TI 32, 33] The injunction arose from a class action lawsuit. Mexican law, formally recognising indigenous biodiversity, gave maize special protection in a 2005 biosecurity law, which states that GM maize must not be sown close to any area known to be a centre of origin for maize. Monsanto queried the judge's impartiality and has joined other companies in filing at least 62 legal challenges.

US

In April a pilot survey found glyphosate levels in breast milk up to 1,600 times higher than those allowed by the EU in drinking water and levels in urine up to 10 times higher than those found in a similar study in the EU in 2013. While the urine levels are within US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) limits (there are no limits set for breast milk anywhere), and while the study needs to be repeated with proper scientific controls, it again suggests the need to review regulatory and industry assurances that the herbicide does not accumulate in our bodies over time. Moms Across America, which is calling for better testing and an end to glyphosate

"We need complex solutions to complex problems. Transgenics are simplistic. Our problems are not solved with one gene."

Victor Suarez, head of Mexico's largest independent organisation of grain producers

use on GM crops and as a desiccant on conventional crops, said, "The mothers tested are mostly familiar with GMOs and glyphosate. Most of them have been trying to avoid GMOs and glyphosate for several months to two years, so the levels of mothers who are not aware of GMOs and glyphosate may be much higher." Dr Angelika Hilbeck, Senior Scientist at the Institute of Integrative Biology in Zurich, stated, "If confirmed in a full investigation, it seems that glyphosate has become a ubiquitous chemical in terms of presence and persistence." In May Moms Across America, scientists and environmentalists met with the EPA, which raised allowable glyphosate residues levels in food again last year. The EPA's Chief of Risk Management and Implementation said the agency expects to publish a preliminary risk assessment later this year.

In May the EPA received an emergency request from Texas regulators to allow the use of propazine (a pesticide identified as a possible human carcinogen and currently restricted to use under license on sorghum) to control superweeds in around 3 million acres of cotton fields. The State is the country's largest cotton grower, producing about a third of the national yield worth some US\$5.2 billion according to the US Department of Agriculture (USDA). Some 90% of the Texan crop is GM. The Director of Regulatory Activities for the Texas Farm Bureau said, "Weed resistance is of utmost concern for us. The purpose of the request is to put another tool in the toolbox for farmers to address weeds that are resistant to other chemicals." Weed resistance can also be controlled with crop rotations and hand weeding, but some reports suggest costs for weeding labour are as high as US\$150/acre. A coalition of public interest groups petitioned the EPA to deny the request. Beyond Pesticides said, "In the true sense this is not an emergency because the weed resistance is predictable since it has been known for many years that GM cotton sprayed with the weedkiller glyphosate would create resistant superweeds. It is an abuse of the law for EPA to prop up failed GE cropping systems with toxic chemicals when the crop can be grown with organic methods not reliant on toxic pesticides and just as productive and profitable."

In June BASF announced it plans to increase production of the weedkiller dicamba by 50% to meet demand after expected authorisation of new GM crops. Similarly Dow is building a new factory for weedkiller 2,4-D production. In April the USDA approved Dow's glufosinate tolerant soyabean. How these developments are consistent with industry and Government claims that GM crops reduce chemical use remains unclear.

Asia Pacific

Bangladesh

In May farmers in Gazipur who were given Monsanto's controversial Bt brinjal saplings said they are not growing as they should and are already under attack from the pests the GM technology is supposed to control. [TI 32] Bangladesh Agriculture Research Institute (BARI) officials were seen removing the institution's signboard at one Bt brinjal field as the farmer, who had been given 1,100 saplings and followed the instructions he was given for their care, wanted to return to using local varieties. The Director General of the Institute said the sign was removed because it used the wrong logo, yet similar signs have not been removed from other fields. Other farmers have cleared their fields of the GM varieties and replanted with traditional ones, and the need for compensation has been raised. One farmer said, "Why the BARI made me a guinea pig? Why they make experiments on Bt brinjal in lands of poor farmers like me?"

China

In June animal feed millers were reported to be buying record amounts of sorghum to make up for lost US maize imports due to contamination of shipments with unauthorised GM varieties. [TI 32] The move is driving up the price for the crop and demonstrating that alternative animal feeds can be used in meat production.

India

In May the Agriculture Minister announced that GM crops, promoted by the previous Government, will not be a priority for the new Government saying, "Only if absolutely necessary can genetically modified crops be looked at."

Pakistan

In May the Lahore High Court ordered the Federal Government to stop issuing licences for GM cotton and maize until a legal framework is put into place to assess them. In response to a public interest case launched by farmers' rights activists, the order includes varieties of Bt cotton and Bt maize that are already approved. Pervaiz Amir, a regional expert for Global Water Partnership, said GM crops disadvantage small farmers in particular, and the country does not have proper testing or regulatory controls in place to protect them. Writing for in scidev.net Amir said that while small farmers are the country's main cotton growers they complain that GM seeds perform only with high input levels (needing more water, fertilisers, and pesticides to thrive), adding that the "overall increased cost of Bt cotton production often forces

small farmers to opt for other crops or leave land fallow". He added, "An International Food Policy Research Institute study confirms that profitability is significantly lower on smaller farms compared to large farms when farmers do not have access to the latest knowhow and are unable to hedge and insure against crop losses." Amir also highlighted the need for the Government to recognise the long-term implications of GM crops for productivity, profitability, resource use, food security and equity, as well as the need to deal with small farmers' literacy and understanding needs when dealing with complex, sophisticated advertising and cultivation instructions.

Europe

Monsanto and DuPont/Pioneer have quietly withdrawn four more applications to cultivate GM crops. The move follows Monsanto's withdrawal of six cultivation applications last year and leaves only the renewal application for MON810 maize and eight other crops by DuPont/Pioneer, Syngenta and Bayer CropScience on the table in the EU.

In May Italy and France each reaffirmed their opposition to the cultivation of Monsanto's controversial GM MON810 maize. A regional court in Italy, citing the Precautionary Principle, upheld the country's national ban on the planting of Monsanto's MON810 following a case brought by a farmer from Friuli seeking to overturn the ban. A coalition of 39 organisations fought the move, claiming eight out of 10 Italians want GM-free agriculture. Meanwhile France's highest court confirmed the existing ban on MON810, the Senate passed a law banning the crop and the Council of State rejected a request from the General Association of Corn Producers to overturn the ban on MON810 saying that the organisation had failed to make the case that growers faced an urgent economic crisis as a result of the ban as so little French corn is GM.

UK

In April former Government Chief Scientific Adviser Professor Sir John Beddington, a long-time supporter of GM crops, took up a new position as Chair of Directors at Rothamsted Research, the organisation currently field testing GM "fish oil" Camelina.

Also in April trade unions and MPs warned that moves to make the Food and Environment Research Agency (Fera) a joint venture with a private sector investor controlling 51-75% of the Agency's work effectively privatised public research. A spokesperson for the union Prospect said, "One of our biggest concerns is that science has a long-term responsibility. We don't

New Chief for GM Freeze

LIZ O'NEILL was appointed as Director of GM Freeze in February 2014.

Previously Head of Communications at the Vegetarian Society and an environmental campaigner outside of work, she took over from Pete Riley, who had steered the organisation since its inception as the Five Year Freeze in 1999. Here she shares a little of what the job involves.

"Taking over from one of the founders of an organisation can be a rather daunting prospect, so when I joined GM Freeze as Director in February I was keen to take time at the beginning to quietly make sure I was up-to-date with all the current developments and arguments around GM. That plan flew rather rapidly out of the window when an application for a new GM trial crop was lodged and a pro-GM PR push launched around the questionable results of trials on GM blight-resistant potatoes. I ended up talking to the national press within days, appearing on BBC Radio 4's *Farming Today* in my third week in the job and drafting what turned out to be the only objection received to the GM 'fish oil' *Camelina sativa* trial.

"The need to respond rapidly to events and political developments hasn't dissipated since, with a Select Committee Inquiry, Government briefing papers, political support for a deeply flawed EU proposal for 'national opt-outs' and much more already under way. Responsive work like that is a big part of what GM Freeze is here to do, providing an evidence-based argument for precaution whenever GM food or farming issues rear their heads in the UK. However we also need to set our own agenda and make sure we are working effectively on longstanding issues, like the fact that foods from GM-fed animals aren't labelled. We are currently developing a new strategy that will give GM Freeze a clearer direction for the next few years, combining responses to new developments with long-haul campaigns. If there's something that you think we should be considering within that strategy, now is the time to tell me, so do please get in touch using liz@gmfreeze.org."

"I can't tell you how far backwards we've gone in the US in the acceptance of genetically engineered crops in the last two years. It has been enormous. I probably spend a third of my opportunities to be at podiums trying to convince sceptical audiences of the safety and environmental soundness of genetic engineering as a way to feed ourselves."

Greg Page, Cargill's Executive Chairman and former CEO

"Among consumers, there are a lot of myths and fallacies being spread, but I think they are also being spread on the science side. There've been some promises made about GM wheat that I don't think are true or are being overstated. I do want to be able to use the technology, but I want to use it responsibly. What that means is, if I use it, I'm going to use it as a last resort. Why? Because of cost and because of public opposition. My approach is we better make sure we don't have another option before we go there... We've now got farmers convinced that genetic modification will give us wheat that will grow on three inches of rain, and that it's the only way to solve our problems. That's how destructive the conversation has become."

Brett Carver, chief wheat breeder at Oklahoma State University

ROUNDUP *continued from p3*

know what a joint venture company is going to do," adding that it is not even clear if Fera scientists would remain civil servants. A spokesperson for the union PCS said, "We've got bad experiences of joint ventures, we don't believe this will be any different. We're very worried about science landing up in the private sector. We predict the private sector coming in to slash jobs, and we predict that within months of taking over they'll announce cuts."

In June then Secretary of State Owen Paterson announced businessman Philip Dilley as the Government's preferred candidate for Chair of the Environment Agency. Formerly an advisor to the Prime

Minister and Executive Chairman of Arup ("a trust-owned global planning, engineering, and project management consulting group with fee revenues in excess of £1bn"), Defra said Dilley is "currently Chairman of London First, a business membership organisation with the mission to make London the best city in the world in which to do business. It influences national and local Government policies and investment decisions to support London's global competitiveness." He is also a Member of the Governing Council of Imperial College.

Any environment credentials Mr Dilley may have were not noted in the Defra announcement.

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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