

Thin Ice



the GM Freeze Campaign newsletter

Issue 38, December 2015

Cultivation opt-outs prove popular but imports proposal rejected

Three months ago we reported on the Scottish Government's announcement of a ban on growing GM crops ([Thin Ice 37](#)). Since then Wales, Northern Ireland, seventeen European Union (EU) countries and one other region¹ have joined Scotland in taking the opportunity to "opt-out" of the one GM crop currently authorised for cultivation in the EU and another five waiting in line for approval.² Then on 28 October, MEPs roundly rejected a European Commission proposal to apply a similar opt-out scheme to GM food and feed that is imported into the EU. So, what do these developments mean for UK campaigners and consumers?

The number of nations taking up the option to ban specific GM crops is impressive. The inclusion of big players like France and Germany is also important. Most of the opt-out "demands" (the term used in the legislation) included an additional two Syngenta GM crops that were then withdrawn from the approval process in early October. Some campaigners are interpreting this as the first step in a wholesale abandonment of the EU by the GM companies but Syngenta has another two crops waiting in line for approval so we certainly aren't celebrating yet.

GM Freeze has spoken out against opt-outs since the scheme was first proposed ([Thin Ice 36](#) and [Thin Ice 35](#)). Practically, we believe that cross-border contamination is so likely that a Europe-wide approach to GM is essential. More politically, the opt-outs plan was

1. Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Denmark, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, Netherlands, Poland, Slovenia and the Wallonia region of Belgium.
2. Denmark only included three of the five "pipeline" crops in its opt-out.

"Huge majority to reject @eucopresident proposal on genetically modified food & feed. Have never seen so much consensus in @Europarl_EN #GMO"

Molly Scott Cato MEP (@MollyMEP) on Twitter, 28 October, after MEPs voted to reject the European Commission's proposal.

supported by pro-GM states (including the UK) because they believe that the option to ban at home will reduce opposition to EU-wide GM approvals. Nobody can know for sure until EU Member State Ministers next vote on a proposal to approve a specific GM crop, but if the opted-out nations abstain we will be much closer to having GM crops grown in English fields.

But what of the food and feed opt-outs?

European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker promised to make GM approvals more democratic, but the proposal put to the vote on 28 October was criticised by pretty much everyone except the Commission itself.

The modern food supply chain is complex and international, so any attempt to treat imported products differently in different EU states was never likely to work. Lawyers advised that the measures proposed would be vulnerable to legal challenges. The proposal also failed to address the fundamental problem that the current system of Qualified Majority Voting on GM approvals does not adequately represent the views of the European citizens who will be eating the stuff.

We asked supporters subscribed to our

... cont. on p4

GM oilseed contamination found in UK

Genetically modified oilseed rape (OSR) plants have been found growing in **small experimental sites** in England and Scotland after they contaminated a batch of conventional seeds. The GM seeds were found as part of test trials for the official registration of new plant varieties. The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs recalled the seeds



in late October and the seed company behind the trials will destroy all affected plants. The fiasco is all the more mysterious as France, where the seed batches were reportedly imported from, does not grow GM OSR. Commenting in the Daily Mail we said that "incidents like this show that GM crops are a very real threat to conventional farming."

European Commission to rule on new GM techniques

THE EUROPEAN Commission is expected to issue a crucial decision in January on whether or not a set of seven new genetic manipulation techniques should officially count as GM. It's a far from academic exercise. If the so-called "new breeding techniques" are classed as GM then the resulting organisms will be regulated much more tightly than if they are not. Food and seed produced with them will be labelled GM if they are regulated as GM, but not if they escape that classification.

The techniques being considered all involve genetic engineering. They are Oligonucleotide Directed Mutagenesis (ODM); Zinc Finger Nuclease Technology (ZFN); Cisgenesis and Intragenesis; Grafting; Agro-infiltration; RNA-dependent DNA methylation (RdDM); and Reverse breeding.

ODM and ZFN are "gene editing" techniques which make changes to genes rather than adding extra ones (though ZFN can be used to add genes).

Cisgenesis and intragenesis are forms of GM that use genes from the same species. RdDM is a new way to "silence" genes. Grafting, agro-infiltration and reverse breeding are new ways of using GMOs in the breeding process. The list does not currently include the two gene editing techniques that have had most attention in the media; TALEN and CRISPR.

Earlier this year GM Freeze joined many civil society organisations in signing a letter to the Commissioner for Health and Food Safety, urging the European Commission to ensure that organisms produced by these new techniques will be regulated and labelled as GM. More recently Management Committee member Ricarda Steinbrecher joined a delegation lobbying the Commissioner in person. At the heart of our case is the fact that, however precise they may aim to be, these techniques are GM because they share many of

the problems of more traditional GM techniques:

- Precision is not the same as predictability. All of these techniques can give rise to unexpected effects.
- Any problems that do occur will be incredibly difficult to put right as genetic pollution cannot be "mopped up".
- Many of these techniques are so new that very little is known about how they work and what could go wrong.
- The products they produce will be patented, handing more control from farmers to big biotech companies.

We believe that these techniques will not help create a world in which our food is produced responsibly, fairly and sustainably and that they must be strictly regulated. We will do what we can to help make that happen.

You can find out more about these techniques and why it would be so dangerous for them to be used without proper regulation at www.gmfreeze.org/nbtbriefing.

INTERNATIONAL NEWS

India

India's regulatory body, the Genetic Engineering Appraisal Committee is reported to have received an application for commercialisation approval of **herbicide resistant GM mustard**, sparking challenges and warnings of resistance across the country. This would be the first consideration for approval since India's indefinite moratorium on GM brinjal (aubergine) five years ago.

Convenor of the Coalition for a GM-Free India Rajesh Krishnan warns that *'herbicide tolerance as a trait has been recommended against by committee after committee in the executive, legislative and judiciary-based inquiry processes in India related to GM crops'*.

He said it was an unnecessary risk, *'Contamination is inevitable of all other mustard varieties, while India is the Centre of Diversity for mustard. Farmers already have a choice of non-GM mustard hybrids in the market, in addition to high yielding mustard varieties. More importantly, there are non-GM agro-ecological options like System of Mustard Intensification yielding far higher production than the claimed yields of this GM mustard.'*

New Zealand

The **Sustainability Council of New Zealand** has welcomed its government's decision to keep all new

techniques for engineering genes under regulation, especially as it goes against the view of its Environmental Protection Agency which had previously declared two new breeding techniques as non GM. The government's review of last year's High Court ruling that only Parliament or the Cabinet could make such a decision, means that it will not deregulate a raft of new techniques. This is good news for food producers and exporters and could have some bearing on negotiations over the same issue in Europe (see above).

Russia

Two Russian lawmakers propose to amend the Law on Consumers' Rights. It would demand food producers attach large and readable **warnings on all GM-containing products**, placing them (in labelling terms) on the same footing as tobacco products.

Lower House MP Aleksey Zhuravlyov told Izvestia Daily his bill wasn't aimed at restricting freedom of choice for Russian citizens, but only at better information about food that people eat and give to their children. He is concerned that, *"Almost all young people today are suffering from allergies. We did not have such problems before."*

In September, Russian Deputy PM Arkady Dvorkovich told an international conference on biotechnology that the government planned to completely ban the use of any genetically-modified organisms or parts thereof in the food industry.

Glypho-gate: the glyphosate battle rages on

On 12 November the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA) published its **re-assessment of glyphosate**, the active ingredient in Monsanto's 'Round-up' and the world's most widely used herbicide. EFSA declared it 'unlikely to pose a carcinogenic hazard to humans', in contrast to the International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC)'s classification of glyphosate being 'probably carcinogenic to humans' (*Thin Ice 36*).

'Roundup Ready' GM soya, modified to withstand spraying with glyphosate, is the most widely grown GM crop in the world. With glyphosate's EU approval up for renewal next summer, this assessment is significant both on its own terms and for the reasons its conclusions contrast so sharply with those of the IARC.

Greenpeace branded EFSA's decision as 'whitewash'. Its EU food policy director Franziska Achterberg said: "EFSA's safety assurances on glyphosate raise serious questions about its scientific independence. Much of its report is taken directly from unpublished studies commissioned by glyphosate producers. The evidence of harm is irrefutable but EFSA has defied the world's most authoritative cancer agency in order to please corporations like Monsanto." The same day, **Friends of the Earth Europe** resigned from EFSA's Stakeholder Consultative Platform, citing EFSA's refusal to share documents and safety reports on

glyphosate.

EFSA's assessment was based on an ongoing review from the German Federal Institute for Risk Assessment, whose own report was challenged by independent scientists for being largely based on unpublished studies provided by the chemical companies that produce glyphosate.

Forty-four environmental and health organisations from across Europe called for a ban of all uses of glyphosate where people and workers are most exposed. **In a letter** to the European Commissioner for Health and Food Safety in October they also said "agencies such as EFSA should not issue scientific opinions, which form the basis of regulatory action, based on unpublished scientific evidence. All their work should be transparent and carried out by independent researchers without conflicts of interest."

Defending the WHO classification of glyphosate, senior IARC toxicologist Dr Guytan said in an interview on BBC Radio 4's Farming Today programme, "Our evaluation is based on studies of people exposed [to glyphosate] in their work. These are real-world exposures and in these studies there was evidence of cancer being caused... we are saying it is probably carcinogenic to humans."

One positive development is that EFSA has set an 'acute reference dose' for glyphosate for the first time. This new exposure limit will tighten the way risks are assessed in the future.

"In the absence of scientific consensus that glyphosate is not harmful, the Commission has a responsibility to protect the public and workers from exposure to harm... it is the obligation of the European Commission to invoke the precautionary principle."

Letter to EC Commissioner for Health and Food Safety, signed by 44 European environmental and health organisations

PUBLIC FUNDS BACK ASH GENOME SCREENING

Researchers at London's Queen Mary University are sequencing genomes from different ash species around the world. Backed by **£1 million of public funding** this could find genes resistant to the *Chalara* virus which causes die-back, and is being promoted in the media as an example of "positive" GM.

Reported in the Telegraph in November, Dr Richard Buggs at Queen Mary, who is sequencing the ash genome, said, "We would try to take a gene from a different species of ash and put it into our native ash ... It could potentially save you decades of breeding." The scientists believe this could be an option to save the 90% of UK ash which may succumb to the disease – first confirmed in the UK in 2012. But opinion remains divided and a GM ash may be shelved if there is enough opposition to modified trees growing in the wild.

GM FREEZE GOVERNANCE IMPROVES

GM Freeze held its Annual General Meeting in October where members and supporters discussed emerging issues.

The GM Freeze Management Committee had proposed two special resolutions. The meeting unanimously supported amending our Articles to:

- Ensure business is conducted efficiently by reducing the quorum of member organisations needed to hold a General Meeting. The quorum had been set when GM Freeze had over 100 member organisations and needed revising in line with our current membership of 27.
- Avoid discrimination by treating equally any mental or physical health problems that may be experienced by members of the Management Committee.

OPT-OUTS ... cont. from p1

email updates to write to their MEPs encouraging them to support a report that rejected the proposal as well as two Green Party-backed amendments calling for a new proposal (amendment 2) and a halt on GM approvals until that new proposal could be agreed (amendment 3).

MEPs overwhelmingly supported the report, rejecting the food and feed opt-out proposal by 577 votes to 75. They also supported amendment 2 by 377 to 293. Amendment 3 did not pass. The UK's Conservatives voted against both amendments but Labour MEP Siôn Simon told one of our supporters *"I considered what people in the West Midlands had to say, and decided that there was a need to call for clear and unambiguous rules to ensure legal certainty for Member States who want to*

restrict the use of GM food. That's why I supported amendment two." Proof that writing to your elected representatives does make a difference.

So what happens now? The short answer is that we don't really know, but are keeping a close eye on a few different possibilities.

It seems there is no guarantee that the Commission will do as MEPs have demanded and produce a new proposal for amending the GM approval process. If they do, it is likely to take some time.

In the meantime, the biggest risk is a speeding up of GM crop approvals. The key decision makers here are the Ministers from EU countries. The Westminster Government is not going to reduce its support of GM, so GM Freeze member organisations are working to help

influence the countries that have opted-out, to keep them voting no.

Another key campaign issue is contamination. There is an obligation for European nations planting GM crops to put in place measures to avoid contamination across borders with non-GM growing states. As Scotland and Wales share land borders with England, we have an opportunity to demand more than the "light touch" that Ministers have been reported to favour. GM Freeze will take every opportunity to do so.

We are keeping our ears to the ground and if there is anything that individual voters can do to help with any of these issues, we will send out an alert to our email list so do please make sure you sign up at www.gmfreeze.org/emails.

Become a local media volunteer

Local papers have a lot more influence than many people imagine. They are a great way to reach members of the public in your area and we know that politicians scan their local papers to find out what their constituents are concerned about. GM Freeze would like to see more local media running stories or letters on the evidence-based case against GM but we need your help to make that happen. We're looking for volunteers to write to their local papers and new websites, adding a local angle to our press releases or "piggy-backing" on a local story. If you think you might be able to help in this way, please email Raoul on raoul@gmfreeze.org to find out more.

GM Freeze in the news

GM Freeze Director Liz O'Neill took part in a GM panel discussion for BBC Radio 4's Farming Today, broadcast on Saturday 31 October. The half-hour programme prompted some interesting correspondence and a generous donation so it certainly made listeners think. Liz also appeared on ITV News Anglia on 27 October, commenting on the importance of biosecurity in relation to research into 'super tomatoes' that could be genetically modified to produce pharmaceuticals. She also featured on 5 Live on 20 November, discussing GM salmon. Her interview with Dara Ó Briain for BBC One's Tomorrow's Food is due for broadcast on 7 December, 9-10pm. Other media coverage in recent months has included quotes in the Daily Mail and a letter in The Grocer. You can find GM Freeze press releases, comments and details of press coverage featuring GM Freeze at www.gmfreeze.org/press.

Michael Meacher

We are sad to report on the death of Michael Meacher MP in October. Michael was the Minister of State for the Environment under Tony Blair's Labour Government and held office from 1997 to 2003. He paused the Government's headlong rush into GM crops by instigating the UK Farm-Scale Evaluations, still one of the world's most important studies on the environmental impact of GM crops. Michael remained an opponent of GM cultivation and a supporter of the work done by GM Freeze and our member organisations until his death. He will be much missed.



GM Freeze is working to help create a world in which our food is produced responsibly, fairly and sustainably. We consider and raise the profile of concerns about the impact of genetic modification. We inform, inspire, represent and support those who share our concerns. We campaign for a moratorium on GM food and farming in the UK. We oppose the patenting of genetic resources.



NEW A referenced version of this newsletter is available online - <http://www.gmfreeze.org/thinice>

GM Freeze, c/o 80 Cyprus Street, Stretford, Manchester, M32 8BE. info@gmfreeze.org 0845 217 8992 @gmfreeze

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