

Old Fashioned Greenwash: Sainsbury's and GM animal feed

6 July 2013

In April 2013 Sainsbury's joined the UK supermarket retreat from commitments to consumers to use non-GM animal feed. The move particularly affected poultry and egg production, but for some companies the erosion was much more profound.¹ The only clear conventional choice for those wishing to avoid supporting the GM industry with their shop at Sainsbury's is the premium-priced Taste the Difference range or Omega-3 eggs.

Sainsbury's 2013 policy change completed a long slide from a once admirable position. In 1999, at the height of consumer rejection of GM foods on shelves, Sainsbury's said, "Now that [removing GM ingredients from own-label products] has been completed, it was inevitable that we should turn our attention to the presence of GM constituents in animal feedstuffs."² By June 2000 the company said its meat and chicken were produced without GM feed,³ and it pioneered Farm Promise milk for farmers in conversion to organic to make the most of their non-GM status. These were welcome developments – moving to non-GM feed is a stepping stone to more sustainable European food production weaned off soya (both GM and conventional) and the damaging factory farming it fuels.

Yet by 2009, ample time to have made good on its 1999 commitments, Sainsbury's was selling few non-GM fed animal products. By 2013 they were mostly eliminated.

Fine words, failure to act

The failure to act on GM animal feed betrays both Sainsbury's customers and its own policies. Supermarkets are in business to make money, but most paint themselves as the harried shopper's friend, helping her/him address sustainability concerns with a weekly shop. In November 2012 Sainsbury's published its revamped corporate social responsibility report, now called 20x20 Sustainability Plan. CEO Justin King wrote, "We believe our values give us real competitive advantage, and look to differentiate on this basis for customers, colleagues, suppliers and stakeholders."⁴

The report claims:

"In recent times we have seen a deep and sustained change in customer needs and expectations, with new patterns of consumption and an accompanying shift in values. **We characterise this change as a rediscovery of 'new fashioned values' where the principles of previous generations are being re-purposed for today's world** and becoming engrained in everyday life and across all demographics."⁵ Two of these so-called "new fashioned values" are:

- "Savvy sustainability: [Consumers] want to be confident about the quality, value and integrity of products **across all price brackets** and for this to be part of everyday life."
- "Act for me: People have greater, more exacting expectations of companies. They have more questions than ever, and **expect companies to deal with the difficult questions on their behalf**, tackling the issues they care about to make their lives simpler and easier. They will choose brands and organisations who are on their side and that they can influence."

Being so clear about its understanding of consumer expectations makes Sainsbury's steadfast refusal to do the right thing on GM animal feed all the worse. Moving away from non-GM feed is a clear violation of the company's promise to "source with integrity", notably commitments 3 (to source all key raw materials and commodities sustainably to an independent standard) and 4 (own brand products won't contribute to global deforestation). "Progress" on deforestation does not go further than paper products, and the document does not mention soya or GM.⁶

Soya is mentioned in a fact sheet on sourcing:

“Sainsbury’s is committed to ensuring that the soya in our own-brand products is sourced sustainably and to an independent standard, well before 2020...We are a founding member of the Round Table on Responsible Soy (RTRS).”⁷

Sainsbury’s joins Monsanto, Cargill and Nestle on the RTRS,⁸ a group that has been roundly condemned by hundreds of organisations around the world as a greenwash of existing bad practice in industrial soya monoculture.⁹ This clearly violates the company’s commitments on supply chains - the 20x20 report says:

“Our challenge is to ensure we address the social and environmental impacts in the supply chain, so everything we sell is sustainable. This means reducing our impact but also working towards restoring biodiversity, natural resources and the habitats we all depend on, and raising social standards.”¹⁰

Despite having had over a decade to make good on its promises to remove GM animal feed from its supply chain, Sainsbury’s is failing to uphold its own values and walking a fine line between public relations and misleading its customers.

Availability of non-GM soya

Brazil’s soya crop is 20-25% non-GM, making it the main source globally.¹¹ At the time of writing less than 60% of Brazil’s non-GM soya is certified for the market, so there is plenty of capacity to expand certified volumes to meet increased demand. Soya farmers need assurance they will recoup the investment needed to secure certification, so long-term contracts are needed to secure non-GM supplies.

Farmers contracted to Sainsbury’s are in a similar position. The company uses short-term contracts, so its suppliers fear the risk of using more expensive certified non-GM soya in feed if contracts may not be renewed and they might then struggle to recoup their costs. GM Freeze has long maintained that if UK supermarkets made long-term contracts with suppliers requiring non-GM feed use the supply chain would feel confident in placing the long-term orders non-GM soya growers need (probably in Brazil) and more non-GM soya would be grown, certified, supplied and fed to livestock. If farmers are encouraged in this way to grow and certify more non-GM soya, the supply will increase and prices will become less volatile.

Instead of using its considerable market power to influence this normal operation of market forces, Sainsbury’s has joined a greenwashing group with Monsanto.

What shoppers want

In 2010 GM Freeze conducted a GfK/NOP poll that showed 86% of Sainsbury’s shoppers want labels on food from GM-fed animals. Fewer than 40% of all shoppers were aware that GM is used in this way, and 72% said they would pay more for meat, milk and eggs from animals reared on non-GM feed.¹² In January 2013 the UK Food Standards Agency published qualitative and quantitative research showing that around two thirds of people want all uses of GM products in food to be labelled to uphold their right to know and to enable them to avoid GM if they wish. The demand from UK shoppers is clear – they don’t want GM in the food chain and they want labels to help them avoid it.

Sainsbury’s tells its customers it knows it needs to “deal with the difficult questions on their behalf”. If this is a demonstration of its “new fashioned values” it isn’t good enough.

Notes

¹ GM Freeze, undated. “[Tell M&S ‘No!’ to GM animal feed](#)” and “[Tell the Co-op ‘No!’ to GM animal feed](#)”

² Organic Consumers Association, 20 December 1999. “[UK Supermarket Chains Ban Meat from Animals](#)”

[Fed GE Feed](#)”

and

Corporate Watch, undated. “[Who wants it? - Demand for GM and non-GM crops](#)”

³ Greenpeace, August 2001. *Non-GM animal feed - Opportunities and costs for farmers*

⁴ Sainsbury’s, November 2012. [20x20: Our 20 commitments to help us all live well for less – Our progress so far](#). p6

⁵ *Ibid.* p4

⁶ *Ibid.* p13

⁷ Sainsbury’s, November 2012. “[Sourcing with integrity](#)”

⁸ RTRS, undated. “[Participating Members: Companies](#)”

⁹ GM Freeze, 22 May 2012. “[Roundtable on Responsible Soya - The certifying smoke screen](#)”

and

GM Freeze, 24 June 2010. [Open Letter: Growing Opposition to Round Table on Responsible Soy](#)

¹⁰ Sainsbury’s, November 2012. *Op cit.* p16

¹¹ IMCOPA, October 2012. Presentation to the European Soy Event

¹² GM Freeze, 15 June 2010. “[Two-thirds Want GM to be Kept Off their Plates – New opinion poll](#)”