

## The Co-op, GM Soya Animal Feed and the Roundtable On Responsible Soy

30 April 2013

### Introduction

On 12 April 2013 the Co-op announced it is no longer banning the use of GM ingredients in the animal feed used by its suppliers of pig and chicken meat and eggs. Marks & Spencer, Sainsbury's and Tesco all made a similar policy change around this time.

Co-operative Retail has been a member of the Roundtable on Responsible Soya (RTRS) for around two years. The RTRS certifies GM soya as "responsible".

Evidence that GM soya is "responsible" is not easy to find. Indeed soya from South America *per se* is not considered to be sustainable due to loss of habitats, displacement of indigenous people and farmers, industrial monoculture cultivation, long food miles, human rights abuses and inefficient conversion into animal proteins. GM soya, with its tolerance to the herbicide glyphosate, adds additional problems to this list including public health, reduced employment, damage to farmland wildlife and resistant weeds leading to increased herbicide use. The situation is further complicated by the diversion of soya oil into bio-diesel production and away from feeding people. The virtual monopoly Monsanto has over global soya seed sales is another major concern.

Furthermore the criteria for RTRS soya are not taxing to comply with, and the value of the whole scheme as a means to reduce the impact of soya production is not proven when considered against the definition of "responsible": *"Based on or characterized by good judgment or sound thinking"*.

### Reasons for dropping the ban on GM-soya in animal feed

The Co-op excuses for dropping its 11-year ban on GM soya in animal feed are increasing cost and decreasing availability.

The price of all soya has increased in the last year by about 10%, partly due to longer waiting times (40-90 days) at Brazilian ports where capacity has not kept pace with the growth in exports. Every day of delay adds to the overall cost of the soya. Increasing demand, especially from Chinese and Brazilian domestic markets, and poor crops in other commodities are also factors in overall price increases.

However there has been a disproportionate 25% rise in the price and premium paid for Brazilian non-GM soya despite the fact that the amount of non-GM soya produced remains about the same. This anomaly has led to Brazil's non-GM soya producers to suggest that UK retailers have been misled about future availability and that they have rushed into making decision.<sup>1</sup> Indeed supplies of non-GM soya are available with renewed shipments.

In other parts of Europe many companies have adopted a "without biotech" label to indicate the animals producing their products are not fed GM maize or soya. These include the French supermarket giant Carrefour and the international dairy company Campina, who have secured long-term agreements to supply non-GM Brazilian soya, as has Waitrose in the UK. The Co-op could have adopted the same policy years ago but failed to do so.

### Roundup Ready soya

Roundup Ready (RR) soya, which dominates production in most countries outside Brazil, is genetically modified to tolerate Monsanto's herbicide Roundup containing the active ingredient glyphosate. Significant problems with RR soya include:

#### *Bystanders sprayed*

People living near RR soya crops in Argentina are exposed to glyphosate via both drift and

overspraying from aerial application. Doctors report elevated numbers of deformed babies in affected communities.

#### *Glyphosate toxicity*

Independent research has demonstrated that Glyphosate has a wide range of toxic effects on people, wildlife and the soil. Health effects include birth defects, cancer, neurological disorders (eg, Parkinson's Disease) and hormone disruption. Impacts on wildlife include damage to amphibians, marine and freshwater invertebrates, earthworms and fish. Glyphosate exuded from the roots of RR crops alters the microbial life of the rhizosphere around roots, including nitrogen fixing bacterium, and makes some plant diseases worse. The regular use of Roundup reduces weed cover, which in turn affects the wildlife that feeds on it (eg, mammals, birds and insects). Roundup formulations as used by farmers in fields are more toxic than glyphosate alone.

#### *Habitat destruction*

Glyphosate is sprayed on RR crops to kill all weeds, and it brings about major changes in weed populations. In the US this has resulted in a massive reduction in milkweed populations in RR soya and maize fields. Milkweed is the food plant of the Monarch butterfly caterpillar, and its reduction, along with habitat loss in its wintering forests in Mexico and poor weather, has reduced the Monarch population by 59% in the years since RR crops were first grown.

#### *Glyphosate in water*

Glyphosate washed from soils and hard surfaces contaminates surface watercourses and groundwater. In the US it is estimated that 1% of the glyphosate sprayed on RR crops ends up in rivers.

#### *Weed resistance*

Overuse of Roundup on RR crops in North and South America has led to weeds developing resistance to glyphosate. There are now millions of acres infested with these resistant weeds that have to be controlled with different herbicides, and annual herbicide use now exceeds the level used before RR crops were introduced.

#### *No environmental risk assessment*

The long-term effects of RR crops on the environment were not assessed before commercial cultivation began in the Americas. The risk is therefore carried by local people and the environment, not the companies that ultimately profit from RR crop production - like the Co-op.

#### *Feed and food residues*

RR soya has a higher EU legal maximum for glyphosate residues than many other foods because the weedkiller is applied directly to the growing crop. This greatly increases the chances of glyphosate residues turning up in animal feed and animal products like meat, milk and eggs. The UK does not monitor residues in either food or feed.

### **What's wrong with soya**

#### *Deforestation and violence continue*

The expansion of soya plantations in South America continues to threaten and destroy several major ecosystems with great biodiversity significance, such as forest in the Amazon basin, the savannahs of the Cerrado in Brazil, the Atlantic forest systems in Paraguay, Argentina, Uruguay and Brazil, the Chaco forests in Argentina, Paraguay, Bolivia and Brazil and the Chiquitano forest in Bolivia. A local activist in the Peasant Farmer's Movement was murdered in 2011 following disputes over land grabbing for soya expansion.

#### *Rural depopulation and damage to the rural economy*

Another major impact of the expansion of huge soya estates is the destruction of traditional farming systems and consequent depopulation of rural areas. Employment opportunities on soya estates for displaced farmers are minimal, since RR soya requires less labour than non-GM, with just one employee for every 200 hectares of soya plantation.

### *Loss of vital plant nutrients*

The continued export of soya for animal feed, including to produce animal products for the Co-op, contributes to the depletion of vital plant nutrients in the soil. Every million tonnes of soya exports 7,000 tonnes of phosphorus and 18,000 tonnes of potash, plus trace elements, from South American soil. This is not sustainable.

### *Loss of agricultural biodiversity and corporate control*

Nearly all GM soya grown in North and South America comes from seed controlled by Monsanto. The company has taken numerous court actions to defend its patent on the RR trait, including against EU soya importers and Brazilian farmers for saving patented seed before RR soya was licensed for cultivation. In North America Monsanto launched court actions to protect its intellectual property rights and maintain sales of both RR seed and Roundup. In the long term Monsanto's monopoly on seed sales will lead to a smaller gene pool being available to farmers, an dangerous and retrogressive step to take at a time when maximum agricultural genetic diversity is needed to meet future climate challenges.

## **What's wrong with the RTRS**

The Roundtable on Responsible Soya is a voluntary certification scheme established in May 2004 and formally launched in 2006 as the RTRS Association. Members include food and agribusiness giants like Cargill and Monsanto, supermarkets like the Co-op, Sainsbury's, Tesco, Marks & Spencer and Asda, and some NGOs (eg, WWF).

The RTRS has not brought a single benefit for the environment, small farmers in soya areas or consumers. For instance:

- All soya plantations assessed under the scheme were existing plantations (ie, already deforested).
- Nothing stops soya producers from continuing to expand and deforest elsewhere.
- Pesticide use is not reduced, and no direct evidence (by sampling and testing) is provided to demonstrate that banned pesticides are not used.
- Small charity gestures are made as evidence of "good community relations", while reports show that Roundup and other pesticide spraying occurs as close as 30 metres from occupied homes.
- Only 0.164% of global soya was RTRS certified by May 2012.
- Companies avoid applying for certification for the parts of their estates that would fail to meet the weak RTRS criteria.
- Plantations on land that was forested as recently as five years ago can be certified because the RTRS cut-off date for deforestation is May 2009.
- RTRS member companies Monsanto and the Dutch seed company Nidera are alleged to exploit farm workers.

## **The Co-op's position**

The Co-op's reliance on GM soya meal in its animal feed is unacceptable for ethical, health and environmental reasons.

As an interim solution the Co-op should immediately reverse its decision to drop the GM soya ban in animal feed and label products accordingly (since the Co-op champions truthful labelling), which would enable it to market all these products as "without GM" or "GM free" as many companies on mainland Europe already do. The Co-op should follow Waitrose by forward buying non-GM soya, rather than relying on spot marks where prices are more volatile and supply subject to interruption.

As the largest farmer in the UK the Co-op should also lead the way in developing non-GM home-grown feeds for poultry, pigs and cattle so that products are based upon the highest ethical and animal welfare standards. One example of such an approach is the Green Pig Project<sup>2</sup>:

*"The project has shown that higher levels of peas and beans than are currently used in the*

*UK can be included in rations for grower and finisher pigs without significant penalties on growth performance or slaughter measures. Furthermore there is no difference between pea and faba bean based diets, suggesting farmers can choose the pulse which best suits them. Thus peas and faba beans are a viable home-grown alternative to SBM (soya base meal our insert) in grower and finisher pig diets.”*

Non-GM soya can provide a bridge from reliance on unsustainable GM soya to home-grown solutions in the longer term. It is important that the Co-op sets a target date for a staged transition to reduce, and eventually remove, dependency on soya.

### **Fair trade**

The Co-op prides itself on leading the provision of Fair Trade products, however this policy does not extend to non-GM soya growers or UK-based poultry producers.

### **Clear labelling**

Over the last decade or more the Co-op has gone out of its way to promote its use of clear labelling. This policy should also apply to animal products to help ensure shoppers can see where GM feed is used. The Co-op could develop animal products labelled “without biotech”, as many European companies do, if it secures long-term contracts for non-GM soya supplies.

### **Key reading**

The information in this briefing comes from a number of fully referenced GM Freeze publications. For further information see [www.gmfreeze.org](http://www.gmfreeze.org) for:

- *Roundtable on Responsible Soya: The certifying smoke screen*
- *Weed Resistance in RR crops – An update*
- *Thirteen Reasons Why the Roundtable On Responsible Soy Will Not Provide Responsible or Sustainable Soya Bean Production*
- *Herbicide Tolerance and GM Crops: Why the world should be ready to round up glyphosate*
- *Resistance is Growing: GM herbicide tolerant crops and resistance in weeds*

### **What you can do**

Press the Co-op and all UK supermarkets to require suppliers to use non-GM feed and provide clear labels on animal products. See our actions for full details at [www.gmfreeze.org](http://www.gmfreeze.org).

### **Notes**

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<sup>1</sup> ABRANGE 2013, 16 April 2013. “United Kingdom Retailers Abandon Non-GMO Soya”

<sup>2</sup> BPEC 2TS, 2012. *Farm case study Sustainable Farming*. Green Pig Project, Update 30. Available at [www.bpex.org.uk/downloads/301804/300771/Farm%20Case%20Study%2030%20Green%20Pig%20Project.pdf](http://www.bpex.org.uk/downloads/301804/300771/Farm%20Case%20Study%2030%20Green%20Pig%20Project.pdf)