

Thin Ice



the GM Freeze Campaign newsletter

Issue 43 March 2017

New GM wheat attempts to outwit nature

February 2017 saw Farming Minister George Eustice MP approve an application for a new GM wheat field trial. Hertfordshire's Rothamsted Research made the application last November to test wheat plants developed with increased photosynthesis efficiency. It claims this will lead to higher yields.

GM Freeze submitted a [multi-agency objection](#) to this application, signed by an additional 30 organisations including Friends of the Earth and some of its local groups, the Soil Association, War on Want, the Real Bread Campaign and others.

One of the key issues we raised was the potential for GM wheat to escape from the trials and contaminate wheat crops elsewhere. This has happened on at least three separate occasions with GM wheat trials in the USA. UK consumers have consistently shown that they do not want to buy GM wheat and any level of contamination would cause huge disruption to both the UK and export markets, affecting our farmers, processors and bakers, to name just a few.

Defra, however, did not consider that the GM wheat escapes in the USA were relevant to this trial. This was partly because they were on a larger scale but more worrying was the conclusion that the *'impact of*



[escaped] GM wheat presence is an economic issue... rather than an environmental one.'

So who's job is it to consider economic, social or ethical threats caused by GM trials?

The short answer seems to be "nobody's", even though this trial was widely promoted – ahead of receiving consent – on the basis that it is designed to 'feed the world'. World hunger is a complex problem that cannot be solved by increasing yields. As our Director Liz O'Neill said in comments to the press,

"World food production already far exceeds the needs of generations to come but people still go hungry. Nobody is starving because of some fundamental flaw with photosynthesis; they are starving because they are

poor. Techno-fixes like GM wheat suck up public funding that could make a real difference if it was spent on systemic solutions like waste reduction and poverty eradication. Then we could all enjoy food that is produced responsibly, fairly and sustainably."

Thank you

We would like to thank all our supporters who wrote to Defra making their own objections. Defra received an impressive 86 responses to its consultation on the application. Even if you weren't able to send in your own objection this time, all GM Freeze supporters and member organisations helped make our multi-agency objection possible. GM Freeze is able to get grants to help with costs for some of our work but the consultation period for GM field trials usually lasts less than seven weeks. That's a very tight turnaround for responses that require detailed technical research, pages of carefully checked references and discussion with organisations that want to speak out but don't have the resources or expertise to do so on their own. There certainly isn't time to apply for a grant so without your subscriptions, donations, monthly standing orders and membership fees we might not be able to continue with this vital work.

European nations reject three GM maize crops but they could still be grown

Officials from European Union (EU) nations voted on Friday 27 January on proposals to authorize three GM maize crops for commercial farming. [More voted 'No' than 'Yes'](#) but the results were not conclusive enough to meet qualified majority voting standards. A qualified majority requires 55% of EU Member States representing 65% of the population. Now the European

Commission needs to decide what will happen next and we expect another vote in March. The UK voted in favour of all three applications.

Two of the applications cover new GM crops – Bt11 from Syngenta and Bt1507 from Dow Pioneer. The third is the renewal of the license to grow MON810 from Monsanto – the only GM crop currently allowed to be grown

commercially in the EU. The last time a GM crop was successfully authorised for cultivation in the EU was 1998.

The maize crops under consideration all produce the Bt insecticide in their own cells. The two new crops can also tolerate being sprayed with glufosinate, a highly toxic herbicide produced by Bayer. These are the same three crops that

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the European Parliament voted against back in October. Unfortunately that vote was not binding but the fact that many of you asked your MEPs to vote against the crops – and then shared their responses with us – is still incredibly important. MEPs need to know what their constituents think because it's not likely to match what they hear from the biotech industry lobbyists in Brussels.

A shake up in Europe

If you find the complications of qualified majority voting confusing and unhelpful, you are not alone. The President of the European Commission, Jean-Claude Juncker, has expressed his concern that national governments, often referred to as Member States, are “passing the buck” on controversial decisions. He [intends to reform](#) the way decisions are made.

Roundup and liver disease

An important new study has linked the herbicide used alongside the most widely grown GM crops, glyphosate, with serious [liver conditions in rats](#). The study used the same strain of rats that the US Food and Drug Administration requires for its toxicology studies and the rats were exposed to the pesticide for two thirds of their three year lifespan.

The key point is that the rats were exposed to doses of glyphosate 1000 times lower than limits allowed in food and drinking water. The dose was also lower than levels found in the urine of most Americans. Even at such low levels the rats showed changes in the liver that have all the signs of non-alcoholic fatty liver disease (NAFLD).

While NAFLD causes no symptoms in most people, it can lead to liver cirrhosis and cancer. NAFLD is much more common in young people than it was in past decades, and liver cancer among Americans has increased almost three-fold since the 1980s.



Many decisions are supposed to be made by committees of representatives from Member States. When these committees fail to reach a qualified majority the final decision falls to the Commission, which is often scapegoated over unpopular decisions on issues like GM crops and pesticides.

In his State of the Union address in September Mr Juncker said, *“It is not right that when EU countries cannot decide among themselves ... the Commission is forced by Parliament and Council to take a decision... So we will change those rules — because that is not democracy.”*

The qualified majority voting rules mean that a large, more populated Member State can sway decisions one way or another. In a briefing to his commissioners in February, Juncker highlighted Germany's decision to abstain in the January vote over the GM maize crops. Berlin, he said, knew full

well that doing so would put the onus for a final decision on the Commission.

On that particular note, GM Freeze and others believe that UK Government Ministers should abstain from voting on issues like GM where all 4 countries do not share a common view. By continually voting in favour of GM at an EU level it is in fact voting only as England, as it is not reflecting the more restrictive GM policies that Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales have in place. GM Freeze is engaging with the devolved governments to support their rejection of GM crops, especially after Brexit.

Whatever changes are proposed to the voting system, they are not likely to be accepted without extensive debate. The devil will, of course, be in the detail and we will keep you informed.

GM Freeze in the media

GM Freeze gained significant media coverage in early February in response to the go-ahead for a new GM wheat trial (see cover). Media work often involves responding quickly and this was no exception. We first heard that the trial had been granted consent via a phone call from a journalist on the afternoon of 31 January. Within a few hours we had distributed comments to a wide range of media outlets, leading to coverage of our statement in

the [Daily Mail](#), [BBC Science and Environment](#), [Russia Today](#) the [Herts Advertiser](#) and others. Liz O'Neill was also interviewed by the BBC World Service [World Business Report](#).

Earlier in January our comments on the EU GM maize votes were reported in [Farmers Weekly](#), [Farming UK](#) and the [Organic Consumers Association](#). Our concerns about GM post-Brexit were raised in [Farming UK](#) news on [17 November](#) and [19 November](#).

Pesticide dangers to be made public

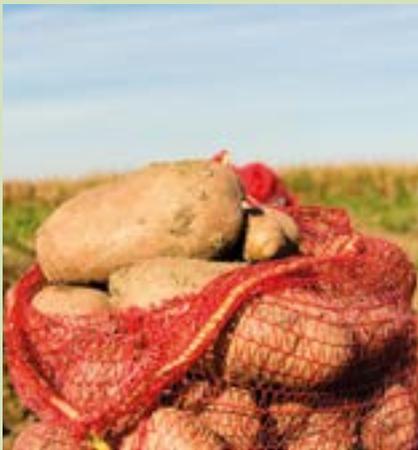
The European Court of Justice made a [landmark ruling](#) last November saying that pesticide safety data must be publically available. For too long now safety assessments have been carried out in secret with regulatory committees making their judgements based solely on industry studies. Bodies like the European Food Safety Authority and Defra's Advisory Committee on Releases to the Environment have not previously shared the contents of studies carried out by the industry on its own products.

This is a clear conflict of interest.

Greenpeace EU Food Policy Director Franziska Achterberg said: *“The ruling says that regulators must release all research used to evaluate the dangers of pesticides, and cannot keep it secret to protect industry interests. Based on the ruling, national and EU authorities should release these studies automatically, and not only following freedom of information requests. Transparency in pesticide assessments is vital, as public health and our environment are at risk.”*

More GM potatoes

The Sainsbury Laboratory has applied for permission to plant a new GM potato field trial at Norwich Research Park. The modified potatoes are designed to resist infection with late blight, in a similar way to those involved in a trial that was planted last year. However, these potatoes will also have genes inserted to make them resistant to nematodes and to “improve tuber quality”. This involves gene-silencing which works in a different way to most GM traits and has not previously been trialled in the UK.



Jonathan Jones is the lead scientist on the potato trial and gave a talk on GM on 15 February. Claire Robinson from GMWatch [gave us her report](#): “Jonathan Jones’s talk at City, University of London about the prospects for GMO crops in the UK post-Brexit was remarkable for its inaccurate claims and strategic omissions. These are understandable, if not excusable, in light of his vested interests in the commercial success of GM. But those interests were not made

clear and there was little opportunity to correct his misleading statements. Jones wants the UK to follow the US in its lax approach to GMO regulation and sees Brexit as an opportunity to make that happen. He believes GM is so safe that there are “no hazards to regulate”, though his talk ignored the complexity of gene function and evidence of the unintended and negative effects of GMOs.”

■ TAKE ACTION

As with all proposed GM crop trials, there is a public consultation and we very much encourage members and supporters to take part.

At the time of writing we are assessing the technical details and planning our own response. We will publish details at www.gmfreeze.org/potato by 8 March, or you can call our Coordinator Raoul Bhambral on 0845 217 8992 for printed information. Please leave a clear message with your name and number and he will call you back. Please contact Raoul as soon as possible by phone or on raoul@gmfreeze.org if you represent an organisation that would like to consider joining a multi-agency submission, as soon as possible.

Details of the application itself can be found here <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/genetically-modified-organisms-applications-and-consents>.

Please let Defra know what you think about this trial. Write to GM Team, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, Area 1C, Nobel House, 17 Smith Square, London SW1P 3JR, by 23 March. You can also email them at gm-regulation@defra.gsi.gov.uk. In either case, please ensure you use the reference number **17/R29/01**.

Sainsbury’s feeds me confusion, not the Truth

Sainsbury’s seems to have its wires crossed when it comes to sending customers accurate information about GM-fed products like meat, eggs or dairy. Thanks to supporters who sent us copies of their correspondence with Sainsbury’s we know that the supermarket is still telling some people that certain items in its *Taste the Difference* product range are non GM-fed. However, in correspondence with us they have indicated that, while the products in question were non GM-fed until the end of 2015, Sainsbury’s can no longer confirm that any of its non-organic meat, eggs or dairy products are produced from non GM-fed animals.

We still need public pressure on the supermarkets so please continue

writing to them, especially Sainsbury’s. Explain that:

- You expect better of Sainsbury’s and are considering shopping elsewhere as a result
- You know organic products are non GM-fed, so you are specifically asking about non-organic product ranges
- Ask what measures they are taking to invest in long term GM-free sources of animal feed

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Ask supermarkets to Feed me the Truth

Many of you have been supporting our [Feed me the Truth](#) campaign by asking supermarkets about their GM animal feed policies, requesting lists of non GM-fed products and making it clear that if you can’t buy non GM-fed you will shop elsewhere. We know that several supermarkets are monitoring customer comments on this issue so please keep writing, making comments in store and if you use social media please [join us there](#) too.

Get in touch with Raoul on 0845 217 8992 or raoul@gmfreeze.org if you would like a copy of our action guide with lots of hints and tips about how you can best support the campaign. We are developing plans to take the campaign to festivals and other events over the summer – if you’re interested in getting involved, please do let us know.

INTERNATIONAL NEWS

USA



The US Department of Agriculture has sparked outrage in Oregon and Idaho by agreeing to [deregulate GM creeping bentgrass](#). The move came after a rapid and what many, including farmer and ex-Government official Jerry Erstrom, think suspicious completion of an environmental risk assessment. Scott's Miracle-Gro Co developed the GM grass in collaboration with Monsanto back in the 1990s. The bentgrass began its escape from trials in 2003 and is now found in irrigation ditches and the wider environment. Scott's has spent millions of dollars trying and failing to eradicate the grass. A spokesperson for Oregon Senator Jeff Merkley opposed the deregulation in an email saying, *"uncontained GM crops that escape into neighboring fields or waterways can pose a serious threat to the livelihoods of nearby farmers and ranchers, not to mention being a costly nuisance to the entire community."*

The GM bentgrass likes lots of fresh water and is resistant to glyphosate. This presents a problem as glyphosate is the only herbicide approved to spray near water. Land workers are now using glufosinate when the ditches are dry.

The deregulation means Scott's is at liberty to bring the grass to market – although it has promised not to do so. It also means Scott's is no longer legally required to pay for the continuing cleanup – although it has promised it will.

Carol Mallory-Smith, a professor of weed science at Oregon State University, opposed the deregulation

because of the grass's ability to spread and its potential agronomic impact. *"There are growers...who had nothing to do with the introduction of this crop, were not going to gain from it, and yet now they are being asked to take responsibility for controlling it,"* she says. With regard to future GM crops she adds, *"What's the assurance that this isn't a trend, that any time there's a problem and a gene has escaped, that we're not going to have somebody to be held accountable?"*

Still in the USA, the first GM apple will hit the shelves of certain mid-Western stores in mid March. The ['Arctic Apple'](#) has been modified to resist turning brown once cut and sliced. The company claims this will cut down on food waste and will keep the apples un-browned for 3 weeks once cut, but without the flavour-altering, chemical additives used by the traditional sliced apple business. The apples will be branded with the logo of a snowflake inside an apple outline, but otherwise customers won't know it is GM unless they scan the QR code on the label with a smartphone.

Wenonah Hauter, Executive Director of Food & Water Watch is unconvinced. *"It's not only an unnecessary product, but the risks have not been fully examined... Regulators have glossed over the possible unintentional effects of this technology, including the potential economic impacts on farmers, the potential of contamination for non-GMO and organic apple crops and the potential impact of the non-browning gene silencing, which could also weaken plant defenses and plant health."*

CHINA



China's Heilongjiang province has [banned the planting](#) of GM corn, rice and soya. This is the country's first such ban at the provincial level. China has neither officially approved nor banned outright the commercial planting of GM versions of these three staple crops. However, China does allow the import of 80 different types of GM product for use in food processing, and large quantities of GM corn and soya are regularly imported.

Heilongjiang's food safety regulations are based on China's Food Safety Law, which does not preclude provinces from putting their own tougher rules in place as long as they do not conflict with national laws relating to food safety. There are other precedents where local governments have acted independently to go beyond standards required by national legislation. One example is the air quality regulations Beijing put in place for the 2008 Olympics, which were stricter than those applied elsewhere.

Liu Denggao, deputy head of the China Soya Industry Association said that globally, there are distinct markets and prices for GM and non-GM soya. Heilongjiang's non-GM crop is much cheaper than non-GM soya on the international market, and this is what it should be competing with. The new regulation seems popular in Heilongjiang and a National Bureau of Statistics survey found more than 90% of respondents were opposed to planting GM crops.

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.



A referenced version of this newsletter is available online – www.gmfreeze.org/thinice



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We use an 0845 phone number to protect the privacy of our staff, who work from home. Calls to this number will cost 3p per minute plus your telephone company's Access Charge.

www.gmfreeze.org