

Thin Ice



the GM Freeze Campaign newsletter

Issue 44 May 2017

Could Brexit mean Better?

The UK's decision to leave the European Union (EU) was unexpected and has caused much disagreement amongst friends, families and colleagues but the one thing pretty much everyone is agreed upon is that it could have far reaching impacts. That is certainly true when it comes to the use of GM in our food and on our farms.

Farming is heavily regulated from Brussels and food labelling rules also originate in the EU. This will all be up for negotiation in Brexit Britain.

What's at stake?

GM Freeze does not believe that the current EU processes for authorising GM food, crops or imports are as effective as they should be, but they are a lot better than nothing!

GM crops can only be grown after going through an authorisation process involving both scientific assessments and political debate. Only one GM crop is currently authorised for cultivation in the EU, though this could soon change (see below).



A wide range of GM ingredients can be imported to the EU, but they are still a rare sight on our supermarket shelves. That's because they must be declared on the label and consumers have shown time and again that they do not want to buy, or eat, GM. In contrast, the use of GM animal feed to rear the animals providing our meat, eggs, dairy products and farmed fish does not have to be mentioned on the

end products. As a result, GM animal feed is very widely used, with the vast majority of non-organic animal-derived foods being GM-fed.

What do we want to happen?

Brexit could see us losing the safeguards which have kept GM out of our fields and most of our own food (if not that fed to our farm animals) for the past twenty years, but it is also an opportunity to ask for more.

GM Freeze will be campaigning for an improvement in standards, rather than just maintaining the status quo. We want strong measures to prevent contamination of non-GM crops, seed and food. We want those who grow, process and sell GM crops to be held fully liable for contamination of non-GM crops, food and seed. We want GM-fed products to be labelled in a similar way to food with GM ingredients. And we want all forms of genetic engineering, including gene

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Commission must respect Europeans' rejection of GMOs and glyphosate

The European Commission is facing a troubling time with several key decisions due to be made on GM crops and pesticides. However, it is unclear whether it will press ahead while Member States like the UK and France face key elections.

Member State governments voted to reject three GM maize crops twice this year, but in both instances they did not reach the required qualified majority to give their decision legal

weight. That means the decision to (re)approve or reject the two new GM crops and the only GM crop currently approved for cultivation in Europe, has returned to the Commission.

Greenpeace European Union (EU) food policy director [Franziska Achterberg](#) said: "When he was elected, Commission President Juncker promised more democratic decision-making. This vote leaves no doubt that approving these GM crops would

break that promise. A majority of governments, parliamentarians and Europeans oppose them, and two thirds of European countries ban GMO cultivation on their lands. Instead of backing risky products peddled by multinational corporations, the Commission should support ecological farming and the solutions it provides for rural areas, farmers and the environment."

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editing and other “non-transgenic” techniques (which are every bit as risky as adding foreign DNA via more established techniques) to be covered by the same regulations.

How you can help

GM Freeze is currently seeking funding for a campaign highlighting the

need for strong GM regulation after the UK leaves the European Union. In the meantime, though, we have been asking General Election candidates to [support our post-EU pledges](#) on GM and many of you have already helped with that. If you haven't taken part yet, there is still time – see our Supporter Briefing (inserted in your paper copy of *Thin Ice*) for details.

Feed me the Truth

Seven months on from the launch of our Feed me the Truth campaign on the use of GM animal feed, we sent out a survey to GM Freeze email subscribers. We were flooded with responses that showed you have certainly been busy.

Alongside creating photos with a blindfold to highlight the hidden GM in the food chain, and sharing the campaign website www.FeedmetheTruth.org, many of you have been making use of our [Action Guide for grassroots activists](#), and taking part in our [online action requests](#). Thank you for this invaluable support and please keep it up!

One of the most important actions at the heart of the campaign is telling the supermarkets that you want to buy non GM-fed meat, eggs, dairy products and farmed fish, and that you are willing to shop elsewhere to get them. Some of our survey respondents expressed frustration at the stock answers they have received from the supermarkets but that is actually a good sign. Supermarket responses to consumer queries and comments about GM-fed products have become more standardised as the campaign has progressed. This means that enough enquiries have been received to trigger an internal discussion and a set of instructions about how to respond. If we keep pushing (with more letters, emails and comments at customer service desks) the next breakthrough could be a review of the relevant policy. It's not as dramatic as a debate in Parliament or a march on company headquarters, but letting the supermarkets know that you really care about this issue is an incredibly important way to make a difference.

The other great tool that we all have at our disposal with this campaign, is our own shopping basket. 75% of survey respondents indicated that they have changed their shopping habits in response to this campaign. That's fantastic, but for real impact, we all need to tell the supermarkets why we are shopping elsewhere.

Do please get in touch if you would like any help with information to include or different ways to get your message across to the supermarkets.

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Conservative voters greener than you may think

Conservative think-tank Bright Blue has polled the party's voters and found that a significant majority want to see [environmental regulations](#) maintained or even strengthened after Brexit. Prominent Tories have claimed that leaving the EU will allow the UK to revamp these regulations but the survey found huge support for the status quo.

Two-thirds of leave-voting Tory voters were proud of the UK's international role in protecting the environment. **Two-thirds also supported a ban on the production of GM crops**, with little difference

between those who had voted to leave the EU in June last year, and those who had voted to remain.

Sam Hall, the senior researcher who wrote a report on the survey said, “... *There is no mandate from Conservatives to dilute current environmental regulations... Most Conservatives do care about climate change and the natural environment. They support ambitious environmental policies... There is a clear mandate from its own voters for the Conservative government to adopt a more ambitious, conservative agenda on the environment.*”

GM Freeze in the news

In April, Princess Anne spoke in support of GM crops on a special edition of BBC Radio Four's *Farming Today* and the media went crazy. GM Freeze Director Liz O'Neill appeared on Talk Radio and BBC Radio London as well as being quoted in the *Express*, *Daily Mail*, *Times*, *Scottish Sun*, *Evening Standard* and more. Demonstrating very little real knowledge, the Princess Royal referred to GM's “*occasional downsides*” and even rolled out the old chestnut that “*we have been genetically modifying food since man started to be agrarian*”. [In response](#), Liz called such assertions naïve and misleading, pointing out that “*DNA is not Lego and there is much that can go wrong when we behave as if it is.*”

A week later, Liz got her own spot on *Farming Today*, discussing the new “*improved photosynthesis*”

GM wheat trial at Rothamsted Research. The research team behind the trial were heavily promoting the technique's potential for feeding the world but Liz pointed out that “*people are not starving because of some fundamental flaw with photosynthesis, they are starving because they are poor.*”

In early May, it emerged that illegal GM petunias were on sale in the UK. The orange-flowered bedding plants have not been through any EU authorisation processes and were first spotted in Finland. [Commenting](#) in the *Times*, *Telegraph* and *Daily Mail*, we said their appearance showed “*a horrifying disregard for regulation which needs to be thoroughly investigated.*”

You can see links to all GM Freeze media coverage that we are aware of at www.gmfreeze.org/news

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Controversial weedkiller

At the time of writing, the Commission is also deciding whether to [re-authorise glyphosate](#) for another 15 years. In recent weeks, the European Chemicals Agency (ECHA) said that there is not enough evidence to classify glyphosate as a carcinogen, paving the way for the herbicide's re-authorisation. ECHA's Committee for Risk Assessment (RAC) agreed to maintain the current classification of glyphosate as a substance causing serious eye damage and being toxic to aquatic life with long-lasting effects, but it does not address the risks of exposure.

Meanwhile, other Member States are forging ahead with their [own herbicide bans](#) and restrictions. Belgium's Agriculture Minister wants to ban the sale or use of herbicides by non-professionals, particularly glyphosate. This move is supported by new information following the release of Monsanto's internal papers during cancer litigation cases in the USA. The documents appear to suggest that Monsanto manipulated research on glyphosate. Leading toxicologist Professor Jan Tytgat, President of the European Section of the International Society on Toxicology, commented, "We can no longer rely on the studies on glyphosate submitted by Monsanto to the European agencies. All the more

because they are not freely accessible. Those studies should now really be made public." Tytgat also called for new studies to ascertain once and for all how harmful glyphosate actually is.

France has banned the use of pesticides in public spaces like parks and roadsides and will ban their sale to amateur gardeners from January 2019. Italy has done the same for glyphosate and has also banned its use as a pre-harvest desiccant (ie to dry out the crop). The Netherlands banned the use of any herbicides on hard surfaces in November 2015.

The Senator responsible for the French ban has tabled a draft European resolution calling on the EU to follow its example.

A long way from feeding the world

The Monsanto Tribunal is an international civil society initiative to hold Monsanto accountable for human rights violations, for crimes against humanity, and for ecocide. Five judges, renowned for their expertise in human rights and international law, heard the case. They were led by Françoise Tulkens from Belgium, former vice-president of the European Court of Human Rights.

The judges heard testimony from 28 witnesses from around the world whose health and livelihoods have suffered from Monsanto's activities. They delivered a legal opinion following the procedures of the International Court of Justice on 18 April 2017 in The Hague. Their damning verdict was that, far from feeding the world, [Monsanto is damaging food security](#).

They concluded that Monsanto has:

- interfered with people's right to feed themselves from the land
- contaminated and polluted soil and water thereby reducing the potential for food production in the future
- undermined farmers' rights and access to seed by forcing them to buy new seed each year
- promoted the damaging growth of intensive monocultures which in turn damages biodiversity. Together this undermines the resilience of local food production systems
- led to the large-scale use of dangerous agrochemicals associated with GM crops, thus exposing people and the environment to increased

amounts of health-threatening pesticides.

If ecocide was recognised in international law, then several of Monsanto's activities would fall within the definition and would be subject to the International Criminal Court.

Whilst the Tribunal is purely symbolic it does however provide a chance for discussion and the sharing of evidence. Organisations including Global Justice Now are working together in the [Treaty Alliance](#), backing a campaign for a UN treaty on Transnational Corporations (TNCs). A successful and meaningful Treaty could withdraw the many privileges that TNCs have gained over recent decades, force them to comply with international human rights laws and be held to account for their actions.

Sadly but not unexpectedly, the UK has consistently opposed the development of international laws that would control big corporations.

Pesticides will not feed the world either

The world's population is set to grow from 7 billion today to an estimated 9 billion in 2050. Experts from the [United Nations](#) have debunked the notion that pesticides are needed to protect food supplies.

"It is a myth," said Hilal Elver, the UN's special rapporteur on the right to food. "Using more pesticides is nothing to do with getting rid of

hunger. According to the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO), we are able to feed 9 billion people today. Production is definitely increasing, but the problem is poverty, inequality and distribution."

As we have seen in Europe (see above) some countries are already leading the way in reducing use of the most damaging pesticides like glyphosate. [California](#) has listed glyphosate as a chemical known to cause cancer and [Health Canada](#) will restrict the use of glyphosate products by updating the labels with information designed to restrict where and how it can be used.

GM potato trial

On 27 April, Farming Minister George Eustice quietly granted consent for a new and highly experimental [GM potato trial](#) at The Sainsbury Laboratory in Norwich. In March, we asked you to object to this open-air field trial of GM potatoes that, at the time of application, had not even been created in the lab yet. In total 119 public representations were received, well up on the 85 objections to Rothamsted Research's GM wheat trial application late last year and a stark contrast with 2014's GM camelina trial, when GM Freeze's objection was the only submission to the public consultation.

INTERNATIONAL NEWS



Field trial applications for GM 'Golden Rice' are awaiting approval from the Philippines Department of Agriculture. However farmers and civil society organisations from **India, Vietnam, Thailand, Indonesia** and the **Philippines** as well as regional organisations such as the Pesticide Action Network Asia Pacific, Asian Peasants Coalition and GRAIN all came together in April [against the trials](#). They called for the utmost protection and preservation of the environment by rejecting GM crops that are presently threatening the lives and livelihood of Asian farmers through increased debts, reduced genetic diversity and soil degradation.

A recent study in India found that the rice, which is genetically modified to produce a pre-cursor of Vitamin A, had abnormalities and poor agronomic performance meaning it was unfit for commercial growing. Previous studies also showed lower yields. Farmers are worried about this unintended effect of the GM rice, which could affect their livelihoods if the GM trait is spread through contamination. It is feared this is more likely if field trials go ahead.



An application to raise [GM Atlantic Salmon](#) has been received by the government of **Canada's** Prince Edward Island. If approved this would be the world's first GM fish factory. AquaBounty had originally stated that it would not raise GM fish at its aquaculture facility on the island but now wants to do just that. Sharon Labchuk of the island's GMO Free coalition said, "We don't

want our island to be the global production site for the world's first-ever GM fish."



On the UN International Day of Forests in March, the **Belgian** action group Field Liberation Movement (FLM) published a [new animated video](#) called 'Floppy trees to fuel cars: Another false solution'. It explained the flaws behind the GM Poplar tree field trial taking place in the Flemish countryside. The GM poplars have been modified to be weaker, as researchers hope this will enhance their ability to serve as raw material for biofuels. However, plantations of commercially grown trees in poorer countries, where land is less expensive, are associated with environmental destruction and deforestation as well as land grabs by large companies who force indigenous peoples off their land. Whilst the trials are designed to avoid allowing the trees to flower, this is less possible at a plantation scale, increasing the threat of GM pollen transfer to other trees.



Meanwhile, in the **United States**, [Syngenta's Enogen](#) – a GM corn for ethanol production – has contaminated non-GMO white corn that is used to make flour for tortillas and other products. This is likely to have been caused by cross pollination from neighbouring fields or improper segregation during handling. Rejected corn is diverted to cheaper markets such as for animal feed, leaving affected farmers out of pocket. *The Huffington Post* compares this 'trainwreck' to the 'Starlink disaster' from years past.

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A step in the right direction

Most supermarkets still claim that non-GM animal feed is too difficult to find, but this excuse is carrying less and less weight. Not long into our campaign, Waitrose announced a partnership with Danube Soya which will ensure that 25% of its pork feed will be non-GM. Before that we heard encouraging tales from Germany where Lidl was moving to non-GM feed for its own brand milk products. Clearly it is possible to find non-GM feed if you believe it is worth looking.

Meanwhile Germany continues to lead the way in [sourcing non-GM animal feed](#). The German government backs the country's non-GM certification scheme Ohne GenTechnik which is run by VLOG – the German Association of Food without Genetic Engineering. A survey in May forecasts the turnover of non GM-fed dairy, poultry and egg products to be around €4.4bn this year alone. And last year the number of labelled non GM-fed food products increased by 71%.

The UK supermarkets have rested on their laurels for long enough but it's up to us to show them that they need to change their ways, or lose customers.

Festival fun

We want to help campaigners and community groups talk about GM animal feed over the summer, at festivals, green fairs, foodie events and any other opportunity. If you are involved with such activities and would like to include something on GM animal feed, please contact Raoul on info@gmfreeze.org or 0845 217 8992.

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