Almost all the UK’s food and farming legislation currently comes from Europe, so Brexit could change everything.

When it comes to GM, that means vital safeguards are under threat. Our new twin campaigns aim to Safeguard our Farms and ensure that food manufacturers Don’t Hide What’s Inside.

Turn over to find out more…. 

Opinion divides opinion

On 18 January this year, the European Court of Justice’s (ECJ) Advocate General Michal Bobek published an Opinion that, depending on your interpretation, either opened the door to unregulated genetic engineering, or simply shifted the terms of the debate.

France asked the ECJ to rule on the status of certain genetic engineering techniques back in 2016, after a group of farmers and environmental organisations called for crops created by these techniques to be treated as GMOs. The status of newer genetic engineering techniques, including genome editing, is incredibly important because if they are not classed as GM there will be few safeguards in place to control their use or monitor any impact their release into the environment may have. Bobek’s Opinion is a kind of staging post in the ECJ process. Such opinions are usually reflected in the court’s final judgements, but that is by no means guaranteed.

The headline in the ECJ’s press release stated, rather alarmingly, that “According to Advocate General Bobek, organisms obtained by mutagenesis are, in principle, exempted from the obligations in the Genetically Modified Organisms Directive”. The media, and the GM industry, quickly claimed that Bobek was backing an exemption for gene editing. Dr Wendy Harwood, from the John Innes Centre said that the opinion “will hopefully encourage further use of valuable new technologies in the production of improved crops”.

However, the Opinion also stated that “an organism obtained by mutagenesis can be a GMO if it fulfils the substantive criteria laid down in the GM directive”, so the devil is very much in the detail.

In that detail, Bobek states that organisms created by mutagenesis are only exempt from regulation as GMOs if the techniques used to create them do not involve the use of recombinant nucleic acid molecules. But, what counts as a recombinant nucleic acid technique?

Michael Antoniou, Head of the Gene Expression and Therapy Group at King’s College London considers that the vast majority of mutagenesis techniques, including the much-publicised CRISPR, do involve the use of recombinant nucleic acid. However, as he told GM Watch, “interpretation of this Opinion will remain controversial until somebody tests it in court or by trying to market… a product based on the claim that [the technique used] … falls outside the definition of a GMO.”

Ricarda Steinbrecher, molecular geneticist and Co-Director of EcoNexus, further points out that “CRISPR is made up of one half protein and one half recombined ribonucleic acid (RNA). In any case, from a scientific perspective all the new techniques under investigation... continued on page 3
However you voted, it is clear that the UK’s departure from the European Union (EU) is the biggest political change in most of our lifetimes and that is especially true when it comes to food and farming.

**GM Regulation in Europe**

EU Directive 2001/18/EC controls the cultivation, import and sale of GMOs in the EU. It explicitly recognises the precautionary principle and the fact that, because living organisms reproduce, the impact of their release into the environment may be irreversible. It respects the importance of ethical concerns about GMOs, requires a case-by-case environmental risk assessment prior to release, and imposes measures to ensure the traceability of all GMOs released.

In contrast, the US follows the principle of “substantial equivalence” which can be roughly translated as “if it looks like a duck and you say it quacks like a duck we won’t ask any awkward questions”.

**Informed consumers**

The EU directive, and the regulations that put it into practice, also require the labelling of products containing GMOs. A GfK NOP poll found that 89% of people in the UK want GM products to be clearly labelled and 72% were willing to pay extra for non-GM food.

Although 97 different GM traits are approved for use in food sold for human consumption across the EU, GM foods are a rare sight on our supermarket shelves because labelling allows consumers to reject GM ingredients at the checkout. In contrast, as we have highlighted with the Feed me the Truth campaign, GM animal feed (for which an almost identical list of GM traits is approved in the EU) has quietly become the norm. The simple reason for this is that the use of GM feed does not have to be mentioned on the labels of the meat, eggs, dairy products and farmed fish it helps to produce.

Even after Brexit, a lot of UK producers will continue avoiding GM ingredients in order to sell their wares in the EU. However, the same will not be true for food imported to the UK from outside Europe. All sorts of products, such as Kellogg’s cornflakes, Coca Cola and Domino’s pizzas, are made with GM ingredients in the US but in a GM-free version for the EU market. Without GM labels these products appear identical so if both are allowed on UK supermarket shelves we will lose our right to choose.

**Disagreement across the UK**

Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland have all used EU Directive 2015/412 to restrict the cultivation of particular GMOs in their territory, whatever happens across the rest of Europe. The Westminster Government, in contrast, has long been a vocal supporter of GM in agriculture. Without the EU framework that has allowed our devolved nations to effectively ban commercial farming of GM crops, the UK will need a new way to respect their right to choose.

**What needs to happen?**

GM crops cause harm across the food and farming system. That means we can only prevent potentially irreversible damage to our communities and our ecosystem by securing a robust and transparent process for authorising the use of GMOs in any form.

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**TAKE ACTION**

**How you can get involved**

Both campaigns will include different actions for you to take as the various Brexit related bills make their way through Parliament so please make sure you’re signed up to our email list to ensure that you hear straight away when there’s a time-sensitive action you can take. In the meantime, please:

- Share this article or our more detailed briefing (available at www.gmfreeze.org/brexit) with your friends, family and your MP. If you would like a printed copy of the briefing or a few spare copies of this issue of Thin Ice, please get in touch via the details on the back page.
- Follow us on twitter @gmfreeze and facebook @GMFreezeUK
- If you live in Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland, get in touch with your elected representatives (including MPs, MSPs, AM and MLAs) to let them know that they need to speak up to protect their nation’s rejection of GM after Brexit. There are details of how to do this on our website, or please get in touch via the usual details (page 4).
Information allows people to take control of what they are buying and eating. That means that we can only protect our right to make informed choices by retaining **GM labels** and extending them to cover products from GM-fed animals.

Pollen, GM or otherwise, is as likely to respect a farmer’s fence, or a national boundary, as it is to turn left at a roundabout. That means that we can only protect farmers’ right to choose, and our devolved nations’ right to determine their own farming policy, by establishing truly **effective measures to prevent contamination**.

We are, therefore, campaigning for the UK to commit to:

- Rigorous regulation that protects people, animals and the environment
- Labelling that allows people to take control of what they are eating
- Protection from contamination

**Twin campaigns launched**

Much of our work trying to ensure that Brexit doesn’t open the door to GM is done behind the scenes and within networks like the Repeal Bill Alliance and Sustain. However, we have just launched two closely-related public campaigns aiming to raise awareness of what’s at stake.

**Safeguard our Farms** focuses on the regulations around growing and importing GM crops, including ways to prevent contamination along the whole supply chain.

**Don’t Hide What’s Inside** focuses exclusively on labelling.

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**Can you help us do more?**

The creation of these campaigns has been funded by two small charitable grants, but we want to do much more than the current budget allows. Donations from our supporters make a key contribution to all our campaigning work so do please consider whether you could make a regular or one-off donation to GM Freeze. You can do this online at [www.gmfreeze.org/donate](http://www.gmfreeze.org/donate), by sending a cheque payable to GM Freeze to our usual address, or by calling us on 0845 217 8992 for details of how to pay directly from your bank account.

*Thank you.*
**INTERNATIONAL NEWS**

**India**
On 29 December JP Nadda, the Health Minister of India's Union Government (the central Government of India) told Parliament that GM soya and rapeseed oil have been illegally imported into the country since 2007. The Union Ministry of Environment, Forests and Climate Change (which regulates GM crops in terms of environmental impacts) had given companies including Monsanto and Bayer permission to import the oils, even though they did not have the permission of the Health Ministry’s Food Safety and Standards Authority which is responsible for regulating food for human consumption. Nadda did not, however, take responsibility for sorting out the mess, instead passing the buck by saying that “enforcement...primarily rests with the State Governments”.

**Uganda**
In December, Uganda’s President Yoweri Museveni refused to sign into law a bill that would facilitate the development and release of GMOs. Writing to the Speaker of Uganda’s Parliament, the President questioned issues around patents and indigenous farmers. He said that “some crops and livestock...have a specific genetic makeup which our people have developed for millennia through selection... This law apparently talks of giving monopoly of patent rights to its holder and forgets about the communities that developed the original material. This is wrong.” The Ugandan Parliament will now look at the issue raised by the President and may make amendments to the bill.

**Germany**
On 7 February, Angela Merkel’s conservative Christian Democratic Union finally agreed a coalition deal with the centre-left Social Democratic Party and it’s good news for German agriculture. Press coverage of the deal states that both glyphosate and GM crops will be banned. The detail of how such bans will be enacted and enforced was not yet clear as this newsletter went to press so we look forward to finding out more.

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**GM Crops drive up pesticide use in Brazil and beyond**

Two different sources have recently added to the growing body of evidence that, despite promises to the contrary, GM crops increase pesticide use.

A study published last year showed that, following the adoption of GM crops, overall pesticide use in Brazil increased 1.6 fold between 2000 and 2012. The same study showed that cumulative growth in pesticide use was three times higher than growth in productivity (measured in kg yield per hectare) over the same period.

Even more dramatically, data released in January showed a 27% increase in the total amount of pesticide sprayed on Vermont’s GM corn crops in the past three years. The most heavily used pesticide was glyphosate, with the amount used in 2016 coming in at more than double that used in 2014. That’s not all, though, as a whopping 34 different pesticides are being applied to Vermont’s annual corn crops, according to the figures released by the state’s Agency of Agriculture, Food and Markets in response to a public records request.

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**Merry Christmas?**

The European Commission gave a festive gift to agrochemical giants Bayer and Dow when it took advantage of the Christmas holiday period to quietly grant six new authorisations for GM crop imports. The crops involved include soya that has been modified to withstand repeated applications of not one, but three different herbicides.

In December, German NGO Testbiotech accused Dow and Bayer of manipulating data for the risk assessment of these soya plants by using samples sprayed with much lower amounts of herbicide than would be used under normal farming conditions. More information, in English and German, can be found at www.testbiotech.org

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**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.

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