

Thin Ice



the GM Freeze Campaign newsletter

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Health, harmony and new tricks for keeping consumers in the dark

However you feel about Brexit itself, the UK's impending departure from the European Union (EU) has certainly revived interest in the politics of food and farming. The UK Department for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) recently held [an open consultation on future agriculture policy](#) and received over 44,000 responses. GM Freeze was, of course, amongst the organisations taking the opportunity to let Michael Gove and his team know what matters most to us. We were also pleased to support many of our members and supporters to have their say through our simple online guide to taking part.

A key theme in Michael Gove's *Health and Harmony* proposals is a

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Fishy business at Rothamsted gets green light from Defra

Rothamsted Research has just [received permission](#) to plant a third open-air field trial of experimental GM "fish oil" camelina at its farms in Hertfordshire and Suffolk, despite strong opposition.

There are many reasons to be concerned about this trial, but the most significant development may prove to be the fact that two genetically engineered lines in the trial, which were produced using genome editing techniques, [have not been subjected to the same level of risk assessment](#) as the plants produced using more long-standing GM techniques.

Documents released in May revealed that, rather than waiting for a key ruling from the European Court of Justice (see [Thin Ice 47](#)) Farming

Minister George Eustice has taken the decision that the plants produced by the CRISPR gene editing technique don't count as GM.

Commenting to the press on the decision, GM Freeze Director Liz O'Neill said "*The European Court of Justice is considering the legal status of genome editing and indications to date suggest that the court will rule that the techniques used in this trial DO count as GM. Instead of putting public health and the environment first, Defra has handed out a free pass to plant highly experimental genetically engineered crops in open fields without a proper risk assessment.*"

GM Freeze has [consistently led opposition to GM field trials](#) and helped hundreds of people to make

their feelings known in a constructive way. This time was no different. Thanks to the supporters who quickly chipped in to help cover the costs of this unplanned and urgent work, we submitted [a detailed, fully referenced objection](#) co-signed by 25 other organisations including farmers, scientists, retailers and environmentalists. We know that many of you also sent in your own objections, using information from our handy online guide. Although it is disappointing that we weren't able to stop this trial, your efforts are an incredibly important part of showing that opposition to GM has not gone away.

Like the previous camelina trial, the GM plants in the new trial are

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shift towards public subsidy that explicitly supports “public good” rather than land ownership. This raises the question of exactly why GM is **not** a public good so the key points in [our submission](#), which you can read in detail on the GM Freeze website (or contact us for a paper copy), included the following.

- Genetic resources and genetic diversity are both key public goods. Genetic resources should not be controlled through patenting.
- The assessment of public goods must take a holistic approach that assess the impact of any changes on the system as a whole.
- Consumer choice is a public good and must be protected through comprehensive GM labelling at all stages of the food chain.
- The UK needs a robust and transparent process for authorising the use of GMOs; effective measures to prevent GM contamination and an effective “polluter pays” liability regime for those affected by GM contamination.
- Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland have all rejected GM cultivation, taking all available political action to prevent GM crops being grown in their territory. The devolved nations’ right to choose GM-free, whatever happens in England, must be upheld after the UK leaves the European Union.
- The new Agriculture Bill is a huge opportunity for positive change, but it cannot achieve a more responsible, fair or sustainable agriculture system without incorporating and endorsing key principles. These include, but are not limited to, the precautionary principle, the principle that preventative action should be taken, that environmental damage be rectified at source and that the polluter should pay. The bill should also explicitly recognise the importance of social, economic and ethical impacts of different ways of growing and producing our food.

Beyond agricultural policy, the other key potential GM Brexit battleground is trade deals. As we reported in [Thin Ice 46 \(December 2017\)](#), US Commerce Secretary Wilbur Ross identified the UK’s current (EU) regulations around GM crops as a “concern” that “could potentially create problems” with a post-Brexit UK:US trade deal. Now an opinion poll commissioned by the Institute for

Public Policy Research and [reported in the press in April](#) has found that 82% of the UK public would rather keep current food standards, even if it means no trade agreement with the US.

Many GM ingredients widely used in the US are also authorised as food ingredients across the EU, but they are still a rare site on our supermarket shelves. As highlighted by our [Don’t Hide What’s Inside](#) campaign, that is largely because GM foods sold here must be clearly labelled.

Campaigners have been fighting hard for years to get GM labelling in the US. They have made significant headway despite the hugely disproportionate resources of those who would rather not tell consumers what they are buying, but the latest development is truly astonishing and proves just how important it is to keep our GM labels after Brexit.

The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) has set out its proposals for GM labelling and the first surprise is that they don’t involve the words genetically modified or, as is often used in the US, genetic engineering. Instead, the proposals (reproduced on page 1) include a range of smiley face logos featuring

images of nature alongside the letters ‘b’ and ‘e’. Apparently, they stand for ‘bioengineered’ which not only won’t be recognised by US consumers but is also very easily confused with ‘Bio’ – a term widely used across Europe to identify foods produced to strict organic standards. Zen Honeycutt, founder of Moms Across America, blamed the move on industry influence, saying in [a blog post on 7 May](#) that, “GMO companies are influencing the USDA to allow a symbol that co-opts the Bio-Dynamic and Organic industry.”

The proposals also include the option for food manufacturers to provide information on the GM status of products via QR codes (which must be scanned by a smart phone) or a text-in service. However, campaigners argue that asking people to contact food companies in the middle of their weekly shop is a far cry from telling them straight what’s in the food on the shelves.

Please support GM Freeze’s twin campaigns to [Safeguard our Farms](#) and ensure that food manufacturers [Don’t Hide What’s Inside](#) after the UK leaves the European Union. You can find out more at www.gmfreeze.org/brexit or contact us on info@gmfreeze.org, 0845 217 8992.

Misleading claims on GM mosquitoes?

Plans to overcome the devastating impact of mosquitoes, which spread diseases and parasites that kill around a million people a year, are always going to attract a lot of attention. When they involve what seems like a clever new piece of science, and the company behind them claims to have reduced the population of a particular type of mosquito by over 90%, they really get people excited. But a new briefing questions the validity of Oxitec’s claims about their GM “friendly mosquitoes”.

GM Freeze members GeneWatch UK published [a comprehensive briefing](#) in May 2018. *Failed in the Field? New evidence of failures of Oxitec’s GM mosquito trials* presents new information released as a result of Freedom of Information requests.

Evidence uncovered includes the judgement of the Mosquito Control and Research Unit in the Cayman Islands that the trial there has had “no significant reduction in the abundance of the *Aedes aegypti* in the release area”.

Dr Helen Wallace, Director of GeneWatch UK, said that the new evidence “raises serious questions about due diligence and about whether members of the public, mosquito control units, health ministries and [the company’s] investors are being misinformed about the efficacy and cost-effectiveness of this approach. Funding new technologies that do not work wastes money and puts lives at risk by diverting limited resources”.

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engineered to produce omega-3 “fish oils” [which were shown in a 2016 study to cause serious harm to butterflies](#). Shortly after the close of the consultation period, a [scientific review](#) into the potential for this type of GM plant to alter the ecosystem recommended “broader environmental safety and risk evaluations” due to the potential for “unintended ecological and evolutionary effects”.

This trial also includes new GM traits. Some of the plants produce wax esters which, if eaten by people, can cause diarrhoea and an involuntary discharge of oil from the anus. The plants in the trial are not supposed to enter the food chain but there is always a risk that pollen or seed from the GM plants could escape from the trial and impact on people or local wildlife.

As Liz’s [comments to the press](#) highlighted, “*Rothamsted Research started off trying to persuade us that GM camelina would save the oceans but now they’re referring to it as a “chassis” on which they will produce*



an array of industrial compounds. GM Freeze wants to help create a world in which everyone’s food is produced responsibly, fairly and sustainably. This trial is a worrying step in the opposite direction.”

Applications for GM field trials crop

up unexpectedly and the compulsory public consultation period only lasts a few weeks. Please sign up to our email list at www.gmfreeze.org/emails to make sure you hear about key events like this while there’s still time to have your say.

Bt crops in trouble

Much debate about GM crops rightly focuses on their potential to do harm, both directly and through associated impacts on the ecosystem, but what if they simply don’t work?

We know that the widespread use of glyphosate resistant (Roundup Ready) crops has led to the development of glyphosate resistant weeds and a basic understanding of evolution suggests the same will happen with Bt crops.

Now, events across the globe are demonstrating that nature is, indeed, fighting back against these GM crops designed to produce their own insect-killing Cry proteins.

In India, Bt cotton is widely grown to protect against the pink bollworm that infests the growing cotton ‘bolls’ and causes serious damage to the final crop. The Indian Government’s Ministry of Agriculture has acknowledged that the devastating pest has evolved resistance to the Bt toxins and is now widespread in Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh and Telangana. Officials have, however, rejected demands to de-notify Bt-cotton – a move that would legally acknowledge that the Bt toxins are no longer effective.



Images of cotton bollworm and corn earworm, US Agricultural Research Service via Wikimedia Commons.

Meanwhile, cotton farmers in Texas are facing a growing bollworm problem of their own. Dr David Kerns, an expert in insects and integrated pest management in the state, has observed increasing reports of cotton bollworms infecting the GM Bt cotton engineered to stop them. “*These outbreaks have gotten progressively worse, with last season being the worst we’ve seen...essentially, we have bollworm resistance to all the Cry proteins*”.

Even more worrying is news that the cotton bollworm and the corn earworm, which is also targeted by the Bt

toxins, have hybridised. Researchers at the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation (CSIRO) in Australia have found clear evidence that the two pests have come together to form a range of hybrids described in [a CSIRO press release](#) as “*a new and improved mega-pest*” that could have “*unlimited geographical boundaries*”.

With so much evidence stacked against the efficacy of Bt crops perhaps we should not be surprised that [Monsanto has shelved a longstanding project to bring Bt soya to the US by the turn of the decade](#).

INTERNATIONAL NEWS



India

Monsanto has been told by the Delhi High Court that it does not, and cannot, own a patent over its GM seeds in India. The verdict, which could be challenged in the Supreme Court, said that seeds, plants and animals cannot be patented under Indian laws. Instead, Monsanto can apply to India's Protection of Plant Varieties and Farmers' Rights Authority to register its Bt cotton seeds and charge a fee decided by a government body. Some commentators have suggested that the ruling could see the multinational, which is in the process of a takeover by Bayer, withdrawing from India altogether. Patenting is a key concern for GM Freeze. As we say in [our statement of core values](#), genetic resources are a public good and should not be controlled by any individual, group or company.



Germany

GM is one of the key issues behind a significant rise in the popularity of organic products in Germany. According to Mintel's Global New Products Database, a quarter of all food and drink launches in the country in 2017 were organic and 58%

of Germans who buy organic say they do so because the products do not include GM ingredients. What's more, 72% of Germans would like an even wider choice of organic products where they shop.



United States

The US Department of Agriculture (USDA) has decided that a gene-edited wheat variety, engineered to have a higher fibre content, does not need go through the deregulatory process used for GM crops. The "nutritionally enhanced wheat" has been modified by a process known as targeted mutagenesis and USDA's decision appears to hinge on the fact that the wheat is neither transgenic (containing genes from other species) nor considered to be a potential plant pest. This is the second gene-edited crop that USDA has cleared for commercialisation without the environmental review required for transgenic crops. However, Steve Mercer, Vice President of Communications for export body US Wheat Associates said that the crop was "not anywhere close to commercialisation".



Canada

Health Canada has approved the sale of GM Golden Rice, even though the controversial crop designed to address vitamin A deficiency in developing countries is not intended for sale in Canada. Golden Rice has been beset by technical problems and campaigners have long argued that supplying vital nutrients through GM crops will further embed the socio-political problems that prevent people from accessing a more balanced diet in the first place. Lucy Sharratt, co-ordinator of the Canadian Biotechnology Action Network now questions whether the Canadian authorities are being used to provide some kind of international "safety stamp" that will allow feeding trials to begin in the Philippines. "There should be some criteria that the Canadian government puts in place such that Health Canada is not spending precious financial and human resources on products that are just not going to be part of Canadian food and farming."

GM Freeze in the news

Professional U-turner Mark Lynas has a new book out and apparently that's newsworthy enough for a slot on BBC Radio 4's flagship *Today* Programme. As a result, GM Freeze Director Liz O'Neill also got a chance to appear on the programme, in a head to head debate with Lynas, who made a name for himself in 2013 by apologising to the Oxford Farming Conference for his past involvement

in the anti-GM movement. In a short and combative encounter Liz highlighted the fundamental problems with GM as an approach to farming and food production, as well as the way in which the media ignores key concerns about the environmental, social and ethical impacts of GM by focusing almost exclusively on issues of food safety.

**DON'T MISS OUT:
Make sure you're signed
up to our new email list**

Like many organisations, we recently updated our email list to ensure we are following new data protection rules in full. If you were on the list before but have not signed up to our new, improved GM Freeze email list, please do so today to make sure you don't miss out. Details, and the sign-up form which is also the one you need if you have never received our email updates before, are online at www.gmfreeze.org/emails.

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