Deal or No Deal?
Post-Brexit politics put GM safeguards at risk

Despite the obvious challenges of a global pandemic, the UK Government is causing concern by ploughing on with key Brexit-related legislation and trade negotiations.

The much-delayed Agriculture Bill – the biggest shake up of British farming policy since 1945 – is once again making its way through Parliament. An amendment aiming to ensure that food imported under future trade deals meets the same standards of animal welfare and environmental protection as that produced in the UK was debated in the House of Commons on 13 May. Despite support from MPs of all parties, including 22 Conservative MPs rebelling against the Government, the huge majority that Boris Johnson’s party won at the General Election in December ensured that the amendment was lost by 328 votes to 277.

The Agriculture Bill now moves to the House of Lords for further debate and plans are being discussed for an amendment that would give ministers extraordinary powers to exempt new genome editing techniques from scrutiny and regulations. Described as an "enabling amendment" the move is driven by the biotech lobby and intends to allow ministers to amend the definition of a GMO used in UK regulations, without consulting MPs. Speaking to the media, GM Freeze Director Liz O’Neill listed key concerns...

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GM Freeze is looking to the future – thanks to you

If you are on our email list or follow GM Freeze on social media, you will already know that, in April, we were making plans to close GM Freeze. We asked supporters to donate a total of £4,000 to allow us to manage that closure as constructively as possible but you had other ideas! Now, with over £25,000 pledged from large and small contributions, we are planning for the future once again.

We cannot thank you enough for the fantastic response to our appeal but the problems that led to our financial crisis have not gone away. Your membership fees and donations are hugely important to us, but GM Freeze also relies on grants from trusts and foundations. We have now lost almost all our core grant funding (which can be spent on any area of work) due to shifting funder interests and competing demands. We have secured grants from several new foundations in recent years, but the new grants are all for specific projects so can’t be used to respond to unexpected developments like field trials, political events or press stories that arrive without warning. We have been holding things together with a patchwork of project funding and small donations for the past few years, but we need a much more sustainable funding plan and to achieve that, GM Freeze will need to change.

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including the risks of releasing genome edited organisms into the environment without proper safeguards; the potential impact on trade if the UK were to use a different definition of GMO than our neighbours; problems around devolution and the need for proper parliamentary debate about any change of this significance.

Meanwhile, much attention has turned to the need for the UK to sign new international trade deals now that it has left the EU. In March the Government published its negotiating mandate for trade talks with the United States (US) raising concerns that, now that the UK has left the European Union (EU), our door will be opened to GM crop and food imports. Boris Johnson promised to “liberate the UK’s extraordinary bioscience sector from anti genetic modification rules” in his first speech as Prime Minister, back in July 2019 (Thin Ice 53) and, although Ministers insist they will not lower food and animal welfare standards, the negotiating mandate does not rule out a relaxation of key food standards, including over the use of GM in food and farming.

Boris Johnson, Downing Street

**Quoted in the press, David Lawrence, from the Trade Justice Movement, said that “the Government continues to deliberately miss the point on food standards, including chlorinated chicken, GM crops and hormone-fed beef. While they repeatedly say that the UK won’t lower its own farming regulations, they have not ruled out importing food from the US that is made to these lower standards.”**

The negotiating mandate document published by the Department for International Trade includes a summary of issues raised in the 2018 public consultation on trade negotiations with the US, and the Government’s response to these issues. GM Freeze submitted evidence to this and three other trade deal consultations that ran at the same time. We encouraged our supporters to do the same so were pleased to read in the summary that 260 individual consultation submissions focused on the need to implement controls or bans on the trade in Genetically Modified (GM) food. Similarly, the summary states that concerns were raised around US food standards in a number of areas, including use of Genetically Modified Organisms (GMOs), "hormone-fed or injected beef", over-use of pesticides, “chlorine-washed chicken” and levels of preservatives and additives.

However, despite a clear message that people do not want an open door for imported GMOs, the Government response carefully avoids mentioning GM, stating instead that *We will not compromise on our high environmental protection, animal welfare and food standards.* Given the US’s early identification of GM regulations as a key “non-tariff barrier” to trade, we are far from comforted by such a bland statement. Indeed, if media reports of tension between trade minister Liz Truss and Defra Secretary George Eustice are to be believed, we are not alone in raising concerns that the headlong rush for a deal will disadvantage UK farmers and food producers.

That rush is fuelled by the impending end of the post-Brexit transition period on 31 December. The same deadline applies to the UK’s future relationship with the EU, raising fears that a “cliff-edge” no-deal break with the EU has not been avoided so much as postponed. However, Minister for the Cabinet Office (and Former Environment Secretary) Michael Gove has publicly ruled out extending the transition period, despite the unprecedented disruption caused by the COVID 19 pandemic.

A strong future relationship between the UK and the EU would help secure more robust regulation of GM in UK food and farming so GM Freeze supports efforts to avoid a no-deal situation. As part of the Brexit Civil Society Alliance, we joined 55 organisations including environmental, equalities, human rights and disability charities in an open letter to the Prime Minister asking the Government to extend the transition period in response to the coronavirus pandemic.

Taking a different approach, Friends of the Earth England, Wales and Northern Ireland has published an open letter to Liz Truss, urging the Trade Minister to call a formal halt to all trade negotiations and make a commitment that talks will not resume until the bulk of the COVID-19 crisis has passed. We’ve signed the letter and you can too at tinyurl.com/toxictrade

Since the UK voted for Brexit GM Freeze has been campaigning to safeguard our food and our farms through:
- Rigorous GM regulation that protects people, animals and the environment
- GM labelling that allows people to take control of what they are eating
- Protection from GM contamination

You can find out more at www.gmfreeze.org/brexit and, if you haven’t already done so, please sign and share the petition to retain our GM labels and ensure they Don’t Hide What’s Inside our food, at www.donthide.gmfreeze.org

In early May, 74 NGOs from across the European Union (EU), wrote to Phil Hogan, EU commissioner for Trade to defend EU rules on GMOs in the union’s own trade negotiations with the United States (US). Led by Friends of the Earth Europe, the letter was signed by organisations including Greenpeace, European Coordination Via Campesina, Slow Food Europe, Corporate Europe Observatory and EcoNexus. Although the UK no longer has any say in trade negotiations between the EU and the US, any softening of GM import regulations in Europe will make it that much harder to hold the line in our own negotiations with the US.
New UK research published in May has revealed that younger leave voters strongly support government regulation of a range of issues, including food safety. The Ipsos MORI poll for Unchecked UK found that 70% of people under 48 who voted to leave the European Union in the 2016 referendum think that the UK should either keep or increase EU regulations and standards. In their report on the poll, Unchecked UK said that the results suggest that younger Leave voters did not vote to leave the EU so that the UK could deregulate its economy or society. Younger Leave voters support existing rules and in many cases want to see them strengthened.

Meaningwhile, a Norwegian consumer survey, commissioned by the GENEinnovate project which promotes “innovative solutions to industry concerns using gene editing technology” and which has recently been criticised for presenting questions with a strong pro-GM bias still found that most respondents were somewhat or very worried that the use of gene editing in plants or livestock could pose risks to health and the environment. Asked about labelling, 76% of respondents regarded it as very or fairly important that gene edited products are labelled to indicate that they have been produced by genetic engineering. Respondents also wanted to know details of the genetic modifications made with over 80% saying that labels should indicate which trait has been changed and for what purpose.
EU Farm to Fork strategy disappoints

The European Commission launched its Farm to Fork strategy on 20 May, drawing some praise but also criticism from Brussels-based environmentalists. The strategy includes a target to halve pesticide use by 2030 but NGOs and over 300,000 citizens had called for an 80% target and a plan to phase pesticide use out completely by 2035. It also describes crops created with newer genome editing GM techniques as a tool to improve sustainability along the food supply chain.

Mute Schimpf from Friends of the Earth Europe said that the strategy “leaves the door open for weakening GMO safety laws, remains dangerously weak on pesticides and industrial animal agriculture” adding that “Agribusiness executives will sleep well tonight”.

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