

Thin Ice

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.

We do not know yet what changes

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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.

Dicamba in the spotlight

The herbicide dicamba has been attracting controversy on a number of counts. In April the Association of American Pesticide Control Officials (AAPCO) asked the US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to consider banning above-ground spraying of growing plants when four different formulations of the weed killer are considered for re-registration in December of this year. Dicamba is particularly prone to drift and has caused vast amounts of damage, particularly in areas where GM dicamba-tolerant crops are grown. In its letter to the EPA, [reported by The Progressive Farmer](#), the AAPCO suggests making future registration “conditional on a year-by-year basis.”

Meanwhile, a group of civil society organisations has [brought a lawsuit against the EPA](#) arguing that dicamba was unlawfully approved for sale and should be banned outright for this growing season. The National Family Farm Coalition,

the Center for Food Safety, the Center for Biological Diversity, and the Pesticide Action Network filed the action in January, calling for a review of the herbicide’s approval.

[Concerns have separately been raised](#) by a study that found an association between dicamba use and the likelihood of developing certain cancers. Researchers from the National Institutes of Health found that use of the pesticide was associated with increases in liver cancer, particular kinds of bile duct cancer, leukaemia and lymphoma. Glyphosate, which is also widely used on GM crops designed to survive repeated spraying with particular herbicides, was classified by the World Health Organisation’s International Agency for Research on Cancer as probably carcinogenic to humans in 2015. Glyphosate use by home gardeners and local authorities in the UK is now finally reducing, though it remains widely used in agriculture.

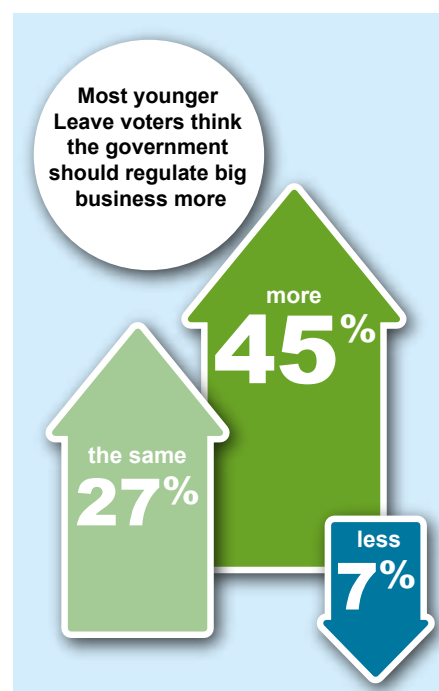
GM cheerleader now in charge of UK research funding

Professor Dame Ottoline Leyser, Director of the Sainsbury Laboratory at the University of Cambridge and a vocal critic of GM opponents [has been appointed as the new CEO of UK Research and Innovation](#), giving her huge influence over how UK public funding of scientific research is spent. Commenting in the press after the appointment was announced, GM Freeze Director Liz O’Neill said “*I was pleased to read that Professor Leyser plans to ensure that research and innovation works for everyone and trust that, when it comes to food and farming, she will start by listening to citizens and farmers rather than the agri-tech lobbyists who will no doubt be queuing up to influence her. Innovation takes many forms and public funding should prioritise biodiverse, agroecological systems capable of providing nutritious, sustainable and locally adapted food for all, rather than high-tech industrial monocultures designed for the convenience of global corporations.*”

Opinion polls support regulation and detailed information on GM for sale

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.*

Meanwhile, a Norwegian consumer survey, commissioned



by the GENEinnovate project which promotes “innovative solutions to industry concerns using gene editing technology” and which has [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 to the same survey regarded it as *very or fairly important that gene edited products are labelled to indicate that they have been produced by genetic engineering.* Interestingly, 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.

INTERNATIONAL NEWS



Germany

Shoppers in Germany spent around 11.3 billion Euros on goods carrying the GM-free label Ohne GenTechnik last year, up 15% on 2018. The figures were [reported by the German Association of Food Without Genetic Engineering \(VLOG\)](#) which certifies the standard. Under EU law the use of GM ingredients must be declared on foods sold in Germany, but the voluntary label also indicates that no additives manufactured with the help of GMOs and no GM animal feed have been used.



Mexico

Native strains of corn (maize) have been [given legal protection](#) as part of Mexico's national heritage. The new federal law promotes and protects the growing and processing methods developed by indigenous communities over thousands of years. Senator Ana Lilia Rivera, said that, thanks to the new law, *"Never, ever, will anyone be able to patent or create economic or commercial rights over the human right to corn."* Victor Manuel Chima of the Fray Francisco

de Vitoria Human Rights Center said that the move will help replace imported US corn (much of which is GM) thanks to *"public policies to guarantee production, not only for consumption but also to guarantee that this corn is nutritious and of quality."*



India

The Maharashtra government took steps to prevent the sale of GM Bt cotton seeds on 1 May this year and is instead expected to tell farmers to wait until mid-June to plant the crop. The move is intended to help prevent infestation with the pink bollworm which can devastate a crop and is more likely to take place with early cotton sowing. The part of this story that will surprise those less familiar with the downsides of GM agriculture is that the Bt cotton involved was developed to be resistant to bollworms. Another sorry tale of a GMO that doesn't even do the job it was engineered for, never the mind wider impacts it's likely to have on the ecosystem into which it has been introduced.

GM Freeze is looking ... continued from page 1

GM Freeze will need to make. We are exploring ways to work more closely with other organisations, including through a possible new coalition campaign on the regulation of GM in UK food and farming. We are also looking at ways to ensure that the knowledge we have gained, the connections we have helped forge, and the resources we have created can live on, whatever happens to GM Freeze. Thanks to your support we have a little time to consider radical options and pursue new funding opportunities that will match those priorities with whatever the world throws at us.

We know that many of our supporters have lost income due to the Covid 19 crisis and we are not asking anyone who has already given to do so again. However, if you were not aware of our appeal or if you intended to donate and have not done so yet, please give what you can today as every penny will help us plan for the future with more confidence. You can donate online at www.gmfreeze.org/donations, send a cheque payable to GM Freeze to the address below or call us on 0845 217 8992 for details of how to transfer money directly into our bank account.

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"*.

TELL US WHAT YOU THINK

As we plan for a future, we want to hear your views on what matters most about GM Freeze's work. Please complete the short survey online at www.gmfreeze.org/survey

If there's no way for you to get online, call us on 0845 217 8992 so we can find a way to feed your views into our planning.

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.



for a responsible, fair and sustainable food system

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