

# Thin Ice

the GM Freeze Campaign newsletter

Issue 62 July 2022

## Westminster plan for GMO take over is in full swing



On 25 May the UK Government in Westminster published a [Genetic Technology Bill](#) that aims to impose untested – and unlabelled – genetically modified organisms on the whole UK food chain. There is so much wrong with the bill that it's hard to know where to start but in summary, if the current wording becomes law, it will lead to a wide range of GMOs being released with:

- No independent safety checks
- No GM labels
- No choice for those who disagree

The bill's full title is the Genetic Technology (Precision Breeding) Bill and that term – precision breeding – is a big part of the problem. Like “new breeding techniques” before it, “precision breeding” was coined by

the genetic engineering industry to improve their image. This bill is the first attempt to give it legal weight and the Government plans do this by inventing a new classification – the “precision bred organism”. GMOs will be deemed “precision bred” if it is judged that they “could have resulted from traditional processes or natural transformation”. These GMOs will then be given what amounts to a free pass for distribution in our food and on our farms.

The Government's approach makes no scientific sense and was roundly rejected in their own consultation last year ([Thin Ice 60](#)). Regulating on the basis of what could have happened, rather than what actually did, misses the point that the way in which any genetic change comes about has a

huge impact on what can go wrong. In addition, the draft law gives no guidance on the timescale over which a particular genetic change “could have” theoretically occurred, leading one commentator to dub it the *Jurassic Park Bill*. As dinosaurs not only could, but actually *did* result from natural transformation, the suggestion that this bill could make [Michael Crichton's cautionary tale of genetical engineering gone very badly wrong](#) a reality, is all too accurate an observation.

More immediately, the organic sector will have no protection under the draft new rules. Organic certifiers are clear that organic means no to all GMOs (whatever you call them) but no

... continued on page 2

## Experimental GMOs grown with no proper scrutiny

We reported in April ([Thin Ice 61](#)) on the creation of a new class of GMOs termed “Qualifying Higher Plants”. Foreshadowing the approach taken in the Genetic Technology Bill (See *Westminster plans for GMO takeover*,

above) these plants are genetically engineered in ways it is deemed “could have occurred naturally” or through a list of techniques that are legally classified as traditional breeding methods. Under the new rules, the

so-called Qualifying Higher Plants can be released for purposes other than marketing (which includes growing for distribution to others) without proper safety checks or measures to prevent

... continued on page 3

## Westminster plan ...

*continued from page 1*

arrangements have been put in place to protect organic farmers, growers and food producers – or, indeed, anyone who wants to operate GM-free – from contamination. As this new class of GMO will be not labelled as such, there will be no legal requirement to trace them through the food chain. This takes away our right to choose and also means that, if something goes wrong, it will be all the harder to put right.

The Genetic Technology Bill only applies to England because food and farming are devolved areas of responsibility. Scotland and Wales have the legal power to make their own rules, but pollen and seed don't respect national borders! Also, as became clear back in January 2021 ([Thin Ice 57](#)), the Internal Market Act will make it incredibly difficult for the devolved nations to keep food produced with these newly classified GMOs off their supermarket shelves.

Scotland's Minister for Environment and Land Reform, Mairi McAllan has [publicly criticised the bill](#), saying that *"If the UK Government is determined to press ahead with this legislation, it must take steps to ensure that its revisions to the definition of a GMO do not force products on Scotland which do not meet standards here without the consent of the Scottish Parliament."* A [paper discussed at a Food Standards Agency \(FSA\) board meeting on 15 June](#) is likely to add to her concern. The FSA covers England, Wales and Northern Ireland (Food Standards Scotland is a separate agency) but the paper states that "The FSA is committed to four-nation working" before admitting that "It is likely that it will not be possible to prevent the sale of genome edited products authorised in England from being sold elsewhere in Great Britain, irrespective of the regulatory regimes in place in any of the devolved nations."

The situation with Northern Ireland is even more of a worry. Whatever happens in England, the European Union (EU) will continue to regard all of these "precision bred organisms" as plain old GMOs. This means that their unlabelled release into the English food chain will create a significant barrier to trade both between the UK and the EU, and within the UK itself as Northern Ireland continues to follow many EU rules in order to avoid a "hard border"

with the Republic of Ireland.

As if all these issues weren't enough, despite Government reassurances to the contrary, the Genetic Technology Bill opens the door for the creation of GM animals with no meaningful checks on safety or animal welfare. Compassion in World Farming (CIWF) has [called it a significant threat for farmed animals](#) and is actively campaigning for substantial changes to the bill. GM Freeze is supporting CIWF and other big animal charities with expert information, but we are leaving them to lead the public discussion on why this bill is very bad news for animals. That's partly because the likes of CIWF and the RSPCA already have the trust of their own large communities of supporters and many politicians, so will make a bigger impact than we could ever manage. In addition, though, we are concerned that the rightly emotive subject of animal welfare could dominate the political debate so much that the huge environmental and food safety risks with GM plants will not be properly recognised.

The Genetic Technology Bill is a huge threat to our farms, our food and the environment. This is an emergency, and we need everyone to play their part

in defending the safety net of proper checks and balances as well as our right to choose. Please think about what you can do, which might include:

- Joining our email list if you aren't already on it. Just add your details at [www.gmfreeze.org/emails](http://www.gmfreeze.org/emails) and we'll get in touch with advice about writing to your MP and more.
- Letting the charities, campaign groups and other organisations that you support know that this issue matters hugely to you. Some of the farming and environmental charities are really active on this issue but many are not. We do understand, as GM isn't the only threat to a responsible, fair and sustainable food system, but this really is the time when we need all hands on deck. GM Freeze is here and ready to support others with detailed information about the bill and the science behind it, but we need voices louder than ours to help raise the cry.
- Encouraging your friends and family to visit [www.gmfreeze.org/join\\_us](http://www.gmfreeze.org/join_us) and sign up as a GM Freeze supporter. This helps us financially, of course, but will also mean we can reach out more widely and demonstrate clearly that opposition to GM is alive and kicking.

## Parliamentary Process – what happens next?

The Genetic Technology Bill was [mentioned in the Queen's Speech](#), when the Government set out its programme for the coming year) on 10 May. It was introduced (called the First Reading) in the House of Commons on 25 May. The Second Reading – when general arguments about the bill were debated – was held on 15 June. At the time of writing, the Commons Committee Stage is about to begin and the Report Stage is expected to follow very soon after. These are the times when first a specially appointed committee of MPs, then the whole House of Commons, will debate the detail of the bill and consider proposals to make amendments. This will be followed immediately by the Third Reading at which MPs can vote for or against the bill, as amended in the previous stages. We understand that the Government plans to get through all of these stages by 21 July, when the Commons starts its summer recess. This is incredibly fast and makes it all the more important that we can contact as many of you as possible [by email](#).

That's not the end of the story as the bill will then move to the House of Lords, where it goes through similar stages. The Government has indicated that it wants to turn the bill into an Act of Parliament (when it becomes the law) before Christmas. However, they do not have a majority in the House of Lords, and it is possible that debate there will both make more changes and delay things more effectively than in the House of Commons.

Whatever happens at each stage we need to work quickly and flexibly. We will be asking supporters to write to their MP, but we may not be able to give you much notice. We understand this makes it difficult for many of you and wish it wasn't so, but we need to be very specific in what we are asking MPs to do (for example voting *for* amendments A, B, C and *against* amendments X, Y, Z) and the information needed to make this kind of judgement is often only available very late in the process.

## Experimental GMOs released ...

*continued from page 1*

escape and contamination.

Those supporting this legal change (and, indeed, the proposals for wholesale deregulation across the food chain) claim that such freedom is needed to facilitate all sorts of new developments but [the first three “QHP” releases out of the blocks](#) seem remarkably familiar. The new laws only require the most basic of information to be made public but the research institutes behind these projects are keen to promote their work, so we know that two of the three are based at Rothamsted Research and bear so much resemblance to their existing trials of [“fish oil” camelina \(Thin Ice 51\)](#) and burnt-toast wheat ([Thin Ice 58](#)) that one would be forgiven for believing that they might indeed [not be new at all](#).

One of the GM releases made under the new rules is a little less familiar but again raises questions about who exactly the new rules were designed to benefit. The John Innes Centre is growing GM tomatoes engineered to contain Vitamin D. This makes for a great press story as the NHS encourages people throughout the UK to increase their intake of the “sunshine” vitamin but, as [we said in the press](#), *“Supermarket shelves are already packed with excellent sources*



*of dietary Vitamin D: from oily fish, eggs and red meat to fortified cereals and an array of supplement choices. Adding an obscure tomato to that list won't address the problem of vitamin D deficiency because poor nutrition is a function of poverty and a broken food system. We need system change not GM ketchup.”*

The John Innes Centre, which is publicly supporting the Genetic Technology Bill, staged a big press story about its tomatoes less than 48 hours before the bill was introduced. We were told that the timing was pure coincidence, but it nevertheless

increased the profile of the release of an experimental GMO that had not been subjected to proper scrutiny. We were [quick to respond, saying](#) *“The John Innes Centre has chosen to release experimental GM tomatoes under new “fast track” rules rather than submitting their work for independent safety checks. They are asking us to take it on trust that nothing has gone wrong while cheerleading for a government that wants to remove the sensible safeguards that protect our food and our farms. Gene editing is GM with better PR and unregulated gene editing is a future food crisis in the making.”*

## Safeguards under threat in Europe and Canada

The UK Government is charging ahead with unwarranted speed ([Westminster plan for GMO takeover](#), page 1) but discussion about the role of new genetic engineering techniques – and the most appropriate way to regulate their use – is ongoing around the world.

The European Union (EU) has been considering the issue for several years and its Commission launched a [consultation](#) at the end of April. The consultation is open until 22 July and could prove significant, but it has been heavily criticised by civil society groups.

Mute Schimpf, food and farming campaigner at Friends of the Earth Europe, said, *“The debate on the deregulation of new GMO is a flagrant attempt to divert time, money and attention away from truly sustainable*

*and already-proven solutions like agroecology. We don't have time to waste with empty and dangerous promises that would only have us more dependent on dirty fossil fuels. Our message to the Commission is clear: Stop pushing for the deregulation of new GMOs and keep them strictly labelled and safety checked.”*

The European Coordination Via Campesina (ECVC) – a group of 31 European organisations representing peasants and small to medium scale farmers – is so concerned about both the form and the substance of the consultation that it has refused to participate. In [an open letter to key EU commissioners](#), Alessandra Turco says on behalf of ECVC that the group cannot take part because *“this consultation does not allow to refuse the possibility of abandoning*

*the current GMO regulation”* despite vast numbers of EU citizens having already rejected similar proposals in a previous consultation.

Meanwhile, Health Canada announced in May that it will allow private companies to release many new GM foods without any government oversight and only a voluntary notification scheme. The new regulatory guidance allows genetic engineers to mark their own homework by assessing for themselves the safety of foods made with newer genetic engineering tools as long as they have not deliberately added genes from another species.

The Canadian Biotechnology Action Network (CBAN) and the Quebec network Vigilance OGM were joined by consumer,

*... continued on page 4*



## Safeguards under threat ...

continued from page 3

environmental and farming groups in [denouncing the move](#). Lucy Sharratt of CBAN said that “Canadians will soon be eating some gene-edited foods that have not gone through any independent government safety

checks, and some of these foods may not even be reported by companies to the government or public...

This decision profoundly increases corporate control over our food system”.

Thibault Rehn of Vigilance OGM said “The bottom line is that companies are accountable to their shareholders,

not Canadians. How can the Minister believe that all companies will provide public information on controversial GM products when they don't have to? Why would we expect companies to voluntarily tell the government and public about these new GM foods?”



The Grocer

The INDEPENDENT

THE TIMES

The Guardian

BBC COUNTRYFILE

Daily Mail

itvNEWS  
Anglia

GBN

## GM Freeze (and friends) in the spotlight

The introduction of the Genetic Technology Bill (*Westminster plan for GMO takeover*, page 1) garnered plenty of interest in the press and GM Freeze was quick to respond. Our Director, Liz O'Neill, was interviewed on the *BBC News Channel*, *ITV News Anglia*, *GB News* and a number of online TV channels, and we were quoted in a wide range of newspapers, magazines and websites including the *Daily Mail*, *The Times*, *The Guardian*,

*The Independent* and the leading food industry trade title *The Grocer*. The news section of our website includes links to the [comments we have made to the press](#) and [the coverage we have picked up](#).

Most media stories about genetic engineering in food and farming still include far too much uncritical repetition of the claims made by those promoting a GM takeover of the food chain. We have seen a bit

more balance in the past few weeks, though. *The Daily Mail* reported “fury” over plans for gene-edited GMOs to be sold unlabelled, while *The Grocer* said: *Fresh produce industry urges government caution*. In May, molecular geneticist Michael Antoniou and regenerative farmer Peter Brown both did a great job of explaining many of the key concerns about “gene editing” in an episode of BBC One's *Countryfile*.

**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](http://www.gmfreeze.org/thinice)

Correspondence: GM Freeze, 80 Cyprus Street, Stretford, Manchester, M32 8BE  
[info@gmfreeze.org](mailto:info@gmfreeze.org) 0845 217 8992

Registered office: GM Freeze c/o Slade & Cooper Ltd, Beehive Mill, Jersey St, Ancoats, Manchester, M4 6JG

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.

/GMFreezeUK

@gmfreeze

[www.gmfreeze.org](http://www.gmfreeze.org)