

Genetic Technology Bill Delayed but Undiminished



The progress of the UK Government's dangerous Genetic Technology Bill (see [Thin Ice 62](#)) was delayed by political events and then the death of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II but the bill is now continuing its passage through the Westminster Parliament. The House of Commons Report Stage and Third reading are now expected sometime in October (see [Ask your MP to represent your views](#), page 2) and the risk that the bill will impose untested and unlabelled GMOs on the whole UK food chain is undiminished.

Between late June and early July,

a specially-convened committee of MPs considered the bill in some detail. Bill committees of this kind reflect the political balance in the House of Commons so this one was dominated by MPs from the Conservative party but the in-depth discussion nonetheless highlighted a number of key flaws in the bill.

The committee heard from expert witnesses including genetic engineers, academics and civil society representatives. Those with a vested interest in the removal of GM safeguards were given a lot of time to

promote their views while only a few dissenting voices were invited to speak to the committee. Nonetheless, senior barrister Dr Michael Edenborough, who specializes in intellectual property law, made an impact. When asked how confident he was that it would be straightforward for lawyers such as himself to interpret the legal rules created by the bill, Edenborough responded: *"I am confident that it would **not** be straightforward"*, adding later that key definitions in the bill amount to "uncertainty built on uncertainty". ... continued on page 2

More evidence of unexpected impacts from planting GMOs

Two scientific studies have recently highlighted different reasons why the effect of releasing GMOs into the environment is far more complex and potentially harmful than those promoting biotech quick fixes would have us believe.

In March, [scientists from Argentina](#)

[and Brazil found](#) that the cultivation of GM soya encourages the spread of the agricultural pest black armyworm (a kind of butterfly larva). The plants involved in the study have been manipulated to encourage the use of glyphosate (because they can withstand being sprayed with the

weedkiller) and to produce insect toxins in their own cells. Their commercial purpose is to help farmers deal with plant and insect pests but, in fact, they are doing the opposite. The weeds evolve their own resistance to glyphosate allowing them to thrive

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GM Freeze submitted written evidence to the committee, drawing MPs attention to key points including:

- Precision breeding [a new term introduced by the bill – see below] is genetic modification.
- Nature protects key parts of the genome.
- All genetic material matters.
- Businesses and the public have already rejected the measures included in the bill.

We also highlighted significant concerns about the detailed content of the bill, including:

- Several key terms used in the bill are not properly defined and the definitions that are included raise many questions.
- If the bill becomes law, plants and animals deemed to be “precision bred” will only require very limited assessments – and no GM labels – before entering the food chain.
- The bill does not require any measures to prevent contamination of the organic or conventional (non-GM) supply chain.

The impact that the bill could have on businesses that want to continue growing, processing and selling GM-free was one of a number of issues that led the Government’s own Regulatory Policy Committee (RPC) to raise concerns about the bill. Government departments are required to produce an Impact Assessment for proposed new legislation. The focus of these assessments is on how new laws would affect businesses, rather than the environment, animal welfare or our health. The [RPC has ruled that the impact assessment for the Genetic Technology Bill is Not Fit for Purpose](#), noting that it does not sufficiently consider the potential impacts of creating a new category of genetically engineered organisms. We couldn’t agree more and key representatives of the organic sector recently added their voices in a [strongly worded letter to the new Environment Secretary Ranil Jayawardena](#).

Criticism of the bill has also come from a group of over 90 international scientists and policy experts who have made a [public statement opposing the use – in the bill and wider policy discussion – of the term “precision breeding”](#). Describing the term as technically and scientifically inaccurate the scientists said that it “*misleads*

Parliament, regulators, and the public” because gene editing is neither precise nor breeding.

As we have highlighted many times before, the language used in political and media discussion around genetic engineering is often hugely misleading and sometimes downright wrong. This is no accident as the biotechnology lobby has spent vast sums of money promoting the idea that newer genetic engineering methods are both very different from older GM techniques and, as a result, inherently safer. This is complete nonsense, so in June we published a [simple briefing on Why Gene Editing is GM with Better PR](#) and sent copies to political contacts and others working to defend vital GM safeguards. Key issues explained in the briefing include:

- CRISPR-Cas and the other techniques often referred to as gene editing all begin by forcing genetic material from various sources into a target organism’s cells.
- Genetic engineers usually plan to remove any “foreign” genetic material after they have achieved the genetic

changes that they want BUT this process is not completely reliable.

- Gene editing techniques are invasive and change parts of an organism’s genome that are protected from natural mutations.
- Gene editing can go wrong in lots of different ways – that’s why it needs to be properly regulated.

The Genetic Technology Bill doesn’t actually use the term gene editing and the “precision bred” status that it will create may end up being extended to include a much wider range of techniques. However, many MPs and others speaking in support of the bill focus their comments on the perceived differences between gene editing and older GM techniques so we hope that our briefing will help everyone who supports a responsible, fair and sustainable food system to understand both why gene editing is GM with better PR, and why it matters. The briefing is [available on our website](#) but if you aren’t online and would like a paper copy, you can call us on 0845 217 8992 to request a print out.

TAKE ACTION:

Ask your MP to represent your views

The next step in the political process for this bill is the House of Commons Report Stage, when all MPs will have a chance to propose and vote on amendments to the text. This was scheduled for 14 September but was postponed by the period of national mourning. We are now expecting it to happen in October but may not know the exact date until just a few days beforehand. Similarly, we won’t have details of all the amendments being proposed until very close to the debate itself.

GM Freeze is working hard behind the scenes, supporting our member organisations, other NGOs and MPs themselves to draft amendments that will reduce the harms done by the bill. We will publish details of the amendments that we support – and those that we oppose – as soon as we are able, but there won’t be time for us to send details out in the post. To hear the latest, please make sure you are signed up for our email list at [www.gmfreeze.org/emails](#) or keep an eye on the bill page on our website, [www.gmfreeze.org/bill](#).

If you aren’t online, you can still write

to – or perhaps telephone – your MP. You should be able to find their details in your local library and you could ask them to support amendments that protect people, animals and the environment by restricting the scope of the bill and requiring more rigorous assessments. Also, those that defend our right to choose with clear labelling and measures to prevent contamination. If your MP runs a local constituent surgery, it would be well worth making an appointment to see them and raise your concerns about this bill. If they are interested in doing more to protect our food and our farms, you can pass on our contact details and let them know that we would be very pleased to help. It is worth noting that, although the bill only applies directly to England, the UK Internal Market Act means that Scotland and Wales will be unable to prevent the sale of unregulated GMOs if it goes through unamended. If you live in one of the devolved nations of the UK this is still very much an issue on which your MP can – and must – speak out.

Our year: 2021/2

April 2021 to March 2022 saw the UK Government begin to dismantle the regulatory safety net that protects our food, our farms and the natural environment. That process has gathered pace since and we look forward to discussing both the last financial year and the challenges ahead at our online Annual General Meeting on 3 November. Here, we share a brief summary of what happened, how we responded and what it all meant for our finances.

The political challenge we faced throughout the year was daunting but – thanks to new funding from the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation and the support of our donors, members and all who value our work – GM Freeze continued to make a real difference by working flexibly and collaboratively across our agreed strategic priorities:

- To **oppose** the cultivation, import, production and sale of GM crops, seed, animal feed and food in the UK, by influencing policy and regulation of all forms of genetic engineering in food and farming.
- To campaign for greater **transparency** and support people's right to make informed choices

about what they buy, use and eat.

- To change the **narrative** and win public support by effectively presenting the evidence-based case against GM across a range of channels and audiences.
- To provide an **umbrella** to support and build the network of organisations, campaigners and individuals that share our vision of a GM-free food and farming system.
- To **improve** our own effectiveness as an organisation.

In September 2021, then Secretary of State for the Environment George Eustice announced plans to give free rein for open field trials of genetically engineered plants if they “could have been produced through traditional breeding”, despite his department's own consultation having revealed that both businesses and the public were strongly opposed to this approach. We worked intensively to brief politicians and ensure that key issues were aired in a parliamentary committee debate, on the floor of the House of Lords, and in a highly critical report by the House of Lords Secondary Legislation Committee.

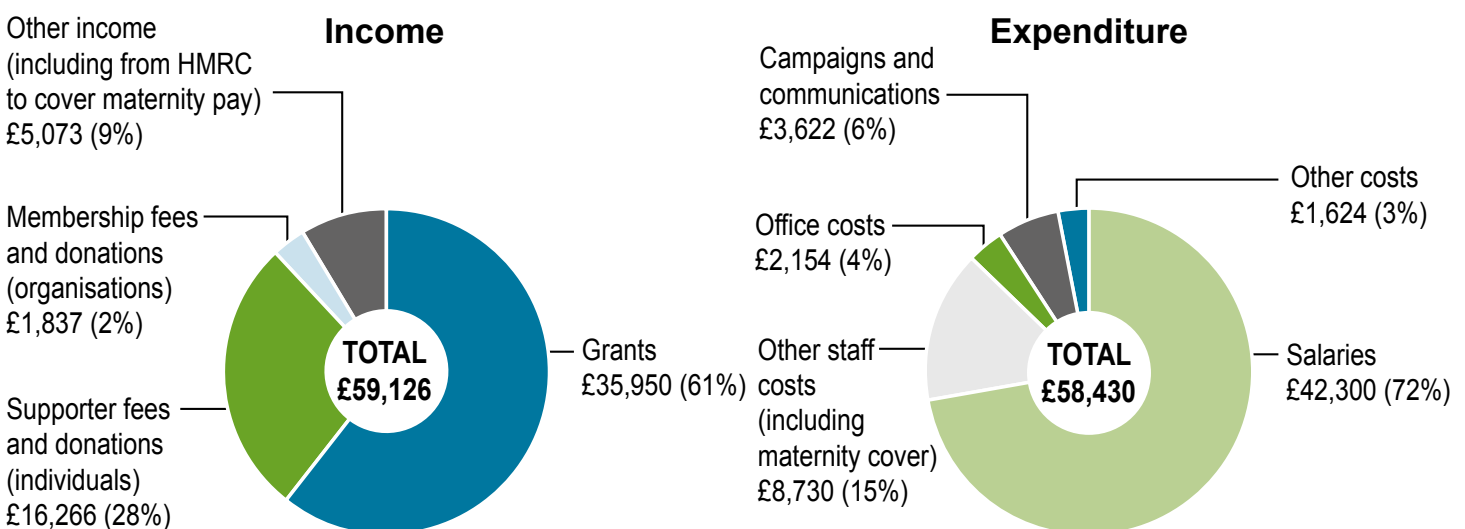
Even as the protections on these open field trials were being removed,

2021/22 saw four completely different applications to grow experimental GM crops under the existing rules. As in the past, GM Freeze led critical responses on behalf of civil society and the many members of the public who think these open air experiments are simply not worth the risk.

Similar detailed work came when England, Scotland and Wales had their first opportunity to make independent decisions about which GMOs to allow into the food chain. The Food Standards Agency and Food Standards Scotland held a joint consultation and we submitted detailed reasons why none of the nine GM ingredients under consideration should be allowed into food or animal feed anywhere the UK.

We also worked hard throughout the year – both publicly and behind the scenes – to grow and support the range of groups, organisations and individuals willing to stand up for a responsible, fair and sustainable food system. Two specially funded projects focusing on this area of work came to an end during 2021/2 but supportive collaboration remains one of our core priorities, now and for the future.

Our finances 2021/2



£3,764 of grant income received in previous years was brought forward to spend in 2021/2
 £394 of grant income has been carried forward into 2022/3 for ongoing work.

Detailed accounts can be found on our website and will be presented at our [Annual General Meeting](#) which takes place online at 2pm on Thursday 3 November. The formal business will be followed by an update on the Genetic Technology Bill and an open discussion about what we can do to limit its damaging impact. Get in touch on info@gmfreeze.org or 0845 217 8992 for details of how to join the meeting, including by telephone if you aren't online.

INTERNATIONAL NEWS

Austria

In July, a survey found that 94% of Austrian shoppers want food produced with all forms of genetic engineering – including so-called gene editing – to be labelled as such. In addition, 92% of those surveyed by the trade association GLOBAL 2000 demanded strict control of food, feed and seeds from these newer genetic engineering techniques and 70% rejected the idea of simpler and faster approval procedures.

Bangladesh

In June, the Bangladesh National Technical Committee on Crop Biotechnology (part of the Ministry of Agriculture) paved the way for the nation's biosafety committee to approve commercial planting of insect-killing GM cotton. Likely to be grown to feed unsustainable "fast fashion", the cotton plants will produce Bt toxins

that are intended to kill insect pests but which have proved to be ineffective as the pests quickly evolve in response. The toxins can also harm beneficial insects and wider biodiversity, while intellectual property rules and rising prices trap farmers in a dependent relationship with the multinational agritech giants that own the patents on the genetically manipulated seed. GM aubergine with similar insect-killing properties has been grown in Bangladesh since 2013 and has raised concern ever since, with no monitoring of compliance with the terms of the approval and crops sold without the legally required GM labels.

United States

The District Court of Northern California has ruled that the US Department of Agriculture (USDA) broke the law by allowing GM foods to be labelled with just a QR code, despite its own study showing that

this approach would not work for consumers. The National Bioengineered Food Disclosure Standard came into full force in January of this year. The standard applies to food that contains "detectable genetic material that has been modified through certain lab techniques and cannot be created through conventional breeding or found in nature" so is not watertight on any front. However, USDA's decision to allow labelling to take the form of these squares of black and white shading that need to be read by a computer or smartphone was, in the words of Center for Food Safety (CFS)'s Meredith Stevenson "deceptive and discriminatory". CFS brought the case against USDA on behalf of a coalition of non-profits and retailers and Stevenson hailed the win as "a victory for all Americans".

More evidence ...

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and spread. Meanwhile, the larvae also appear to have become stronger, perhaps as a result of what the study's authors call "positive stress".

In the same month, a study published in the journal *Science* highlighted one of the ways in which changes to single genes can impact food webs and ecosystems. [A keystone gene underlies the persistence of an experimental food web](#) found that reducing the natural diversity of a single gene in a single plant destabilized the food web in which the plant was operating. Such impacts were unexpected and suggest that even small reductions in genetic diversity can disturb the ecosystem. GM plants are grown in monocultures, with no genetic diversity whatsoever.

March with us for good food

GM Freeze is supporting the [Good Food, Good Farming March](#) in central London on Saturday 15 October and we'd love it if you could come along too.

The London march is organised by our friends at the Landworkers' Alliance as part of a Europe-wide period of action. It will urge the Government to do more to create the food and farming systems we really need and one of the identified demands is regulation of GMOs to protect consumers, producers and the environment. With the Genetic Technology Bill being debated in Parliament it has never been more important to demonstrate that citizens do not support the dismantling of GM safeguards so we really want to make a splash.

At the time of writing we are still organising some the details of our involvement in the march but whatever

else we are able to put in place, you can simply turn up to Parliament Square (SW1P 3JX – beside the Houses of Parliament) a bit before 12noon on Saturday 15 October and look for the GM Freeze banners. If you would like to help with organising more banners, costumes or other activities to ensure that public support for robust GM protections is clearly visible on the day, get in touch on info@gmfreeze.org or by calling us on 0845 217 8992.



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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