

Thin Ice



the GM Freeze Campaign newsletter

Issue 67 April 2024

Football at the Food Standards Agency



FSA Board meeting, Leeds, 20th March 2024

The Food Standards Agency's [Board meeting](#) in Leeds in March was the first since the consultation on its proposed deregulation of so-called Precision Bred Organisms (PBOs) – new-style GMOs to many of the rest of us. The public and others (81%) are overwhelmingly [against](#) these plans, and there remain major unresolved issues around safety, labelling, traceability, threats to organic standards and trade with Europe and the rest of the United Kingdom.

Nevertheless, the agency will press on regardless. Much of the meeting was

spent kicking responsibilities over the net to the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs or up into the higher echelons of Government that passed the Genetic Technology (Precision Breeding) Act last year.

Trade uncertainty

It was also the first FSA Board meeting since the European Parliament voted to require traceability and labelling of products from New Genomic Techniques (NGTs). Divergent regulatory systems could result in checks and certification requirements on (potentially all) UK

food exports entering the EU. When asked in the meeting by GM Freeze's Leonie Nimmo whether the FSA has conducted any risk modelling on this eventuality it failed to respond.

When traceability does not mean traceability

During a break, Leonie spoke to Dr. James Cooper, Deputy Director of Food Policy.

Cooper had explained to the Board that the mechanisms available to businesses that want to trace

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Member's Profile: South East Essex Organic Gardeners

South East Essex Organic Gardeners aims to “promote the organic way and a community response and reaction to develop resilience locally and globally.” Hosting regular meetings, events and outings in partnership with other local organisations, they have done much to build a healthy local network. They describe this as “a web fed by and feeding those concerned with the ecology of our planet and our human impact on it.”

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Image credit: Trust Links

The South East Essex Organic Gardeners committee and some volunteers

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whether products have 'PBOs' in them involve asking up the supply line, and "if somebody doesn't want to tell you, then don't do business with them." Cooper acknowledged to Leonie that the traceability he envisaged was to all *potential* sources. Likewise, it wouldn't be possible to trace the exact products that contained a 'PBO', only those that *potentially* contained it, and in the event of a product recall all products potentially containing it would need to be removed.

When risk assessment does not mean safety testing

With regard to safety testing, the FSA's published documents are unclear on what if any testing will be conducted or commissioned by the FSA in its process of authorising the 'PBOs' it has categorised as in need of additional risk assessment. Cooper informed Leonie that there would be none: it will all be conducted by the developers. This may include animal testing or anything else they deem necessary to establish that

their products are safe. The FSA will analyse the data provided, but there will be no independent testing.

When safety can mean different things

Cooper was keen to point out that – as with any other product – it is the manufacturer's legal responsibility to ensure that food is safe. When Leonie questioned this with regard to ultra-processed, high sugar and high fat foods, or indeed smoking, Cooper's response was that "it depends on your definition of safe." He later clarified that ultra-processed foods are the Department of Health and Social Care's policy responsibility.

When labelling does not mean labelling

With regard to labelling for particular population groups, the FSA's consultation pack [states](#): "As with any food, if there is a need to provide safety information for a particular population group, (for example, hypersensitive consumers or people with certain health conditions) this can be required as appropriate."

The implication is that 'PBOs' will be labelled if required. Leonie pointed out to Dr. Cooper that this was incompatible with the FSA's determination not to label. In response, Cooper asserted that 'PBOs' are the same as conventionally bred organisms, so if there was a requirement to label a novel allergen – for example, if cabbages were identified as an allergen – then all cabbages would need to be labelled.

So – to clarify – under the proposed framework, there will never be labelling of 'PBOs' for particular population groups. This is worrying given increasing concern about novel allergens. An expert opinion on the risks of new GM plants [published](#) by the French health agency states that potential risks include those "linked to unexpected changes in the composition of the plant, which could give rise to nutritional, allergenicity or toxicity problems."

A video of the Board meeting and questions can be [viewed](#) on the FSA's YouTube channel and our written questions can be [viewed](#) on its website.

Anger tempered by relief at European GM vote; citizen action secures key wins

A fiercely contested vote in the European Parliament in February paved the way for the widespread deregulation of certain genetically modified organisms (GMOs), but important amendments were passed to require labelling and traceability.

Europeans [took to the streets](#) outside the European Parliament in advance of the vote, with the mobilising force of the European Coordination Via Campesina, Corporate Europe Observatory (CEO), IFOAM Organics Europe and Greenpeace EU amongst others. This alliance of environmental and social organisations underscores the importance of the proposed deregulation – for consumers, the environment, and how tightly our food system is shackled to agribusiness.

The proposal – to remove organisms developed using 'New Genomic Techniques' (NGTs) from the regulatory regime which applies to older-style GMOs – originated with the European Commission and in February

Image credit: @nina_holland – Corporate Europe Observatory



Protests outside the European Parliament, 6th February 2024.

was adopted by the European Parliament by a [narrow margin](#).

The legislative procedure has now passed to the Council of the European Union, which has thus far failed to reach an agreement, [reportedly](#) due to contested provisions on patents and whether states can ban NGT cultivation nationally. The chair of the European Parliament's environment committee (ENVI), [told](#) news outlet Euractiv that without swift agreement at the Council level the legislation is unlikely to be approved before the EU elections in June.

The Parliament's [vote](#) was a tense

affair, with a raft of amendments proposed by both left and right parties being voted on individually, and many being adopted or rejected by narrow margins. Key votes which secured traceability and labelling provisions [passed](#) by just 17 and 15 votes out of around 630. Health and environment risk assessments, as well as coexistence measures, [did not make](#) the final cut.

Responses to the final outcome were mixed. Corporate Europe Observatory [called it](#) a "handout to biotech industry", though highlighted the importance of a "strong campaign supported by hundreds of thousands of citizens" in security labelling and safety provisions.

The EU's stance on labelling and traceability now stands in contrast to the deregulation regime being proposed in the UK. Whether it will withstand the next stages of the European legislative process remains to be seen.

Snake oil tomatoes: As some much-hyped genetically modified tomatoes are launched in the USA, GM Freeze asks, why bother?

Genetically modified tomato seeds developed in Norwich, UK, went on sale in the USA in February, fifteen years after the project was [first announced](#). Scientist Cathie Martin [gushed](#) about the “health-giving compounds and striking beauty of the fruit,” and news outlets including ITV New Anglia [covered](#) the story. But is the hype warranted, or as deceptive as cure-all snake oil?

Unsubstantiated health claims

Back in 2008, the big news about the purple GM tomatoes in question was their cancer-fighting potential. Cancer Research UK immediately [rejected](#) the claims, which seem to have since been quietly ditched. Today the health claims relate to other benefits associated with increased levels of anthocyanins, which are antioxidants found in red and purple fruits. Their natural presence in tomatoes, however, is limited, so Martin’s team used genes from snapdragon plants in a process of genetic modification. The result: purple tomatoes, sold with added allusions to improved health.

The health benefits of anthocyanins have not been substantiated to a level acceptable to authorities. As of [2022](#), all claims that involved naturally-occurring anthocyanins were not compliant with UK regulations because they were found to be unsubstantiated, and a similar situation exists in the USA and Europe.

One thing that is easier to measure is the [impact](#) of anthocyanins on prolonging shelf life. We also know that tomatoes are an [important source](#) of vitamin C, and that vitamin C [degrades rapidly](#) after harvest. Surely prolonging shelf life would therefore reduce the nutritional value of tomatoes, and be more of a curse than a blessing for public health.

Public money, purple tomatoes and poverty

We already know what we need for balanced, nutritious diets, and nature is more than capable of providing these things for us. Malnutrition, and other food-associated problems we face as a society, are a result of lack of access, poverty, inadequate education, and inadequate regulation of unhealthy food. These are the things we need to address, and we need money and political will to do this.

Yet Cathie Martin’s purple tomatoes were developed at an institution that [receives](#) more than half its funding from UK government sources. How different could things be if this and other public money that is thrown at the biotech industry were used to address the root causes of poor diets and inadequate access to healthy food?

Not so novel

Perhaps the strangest thing about this story is that purple tomatoes are not strange at all. Back in 2011 Jim Myers of Oregon State University [released](#) the first purple tomatoes containing anthocyanins, developed using conventional breeding methods.

Myers [told](#) NPR that he began working on tomatoes around the same time as Cathie Martin, but today there are at least 50 progenies of his original Indigo Rose being grown by both small farms and big companies throughout the world.

A danger to diversity?

The development of the conventionally-bred purple tomato was made possible as a result of diverse genetic material being available to the plant breeders. The genetic modification and patenting of organisms puts this diversity at risk. Far from being the answer to global food problems, GM could undermine our ability to breed and adapt to climate change in the future.

A patent threat

At around the time of the GM tomato launch in February, a different variety of purple tomato seeds were withdrawn from catalogues across the USA in response to allegations of patent infringement by Martin’s company Norfolk Healthy Produce. As it withdrew the seeds, distributors Baker Creek [said](#) that testing “did not conclusively establish that the Purple Galaxy is truly free of any genetically-modified material.”

GM Watch have [provided](#) a detailed analysis of this case, pointing out that “either possibility – that the tomato was GMO or non-GMO – is extremely concerning”. Potential causes of concern include biosafety breaches, fraud, the threat of litigation quashing innovation, or the illegal patenting of naturally-occurring genes. “Plant breeders are becoming increasingly fearful of inadvertently

infringing the patents of seed companies, in particular those of the large multinationals,” according to GM Watch.

You can catch GM Freeze’s Leonie Nimmo outlining the problems with GM food on ITV News Anglia’s piece on the purple GM tomatoes: www.itv.com/news/anglia/2024-03-04/superfood-purple-tomato-developed-in-uk-now-on-sale-in-us

We’ve Been Framed: a GM messaging guide

GM Freeze is delighted to share **We’ve Been Framed** – a resource to help you navigate the shark-infested waters of the GM debate by identifying where narratives and language are used to manipulate or mislead, and providing alternatives which more accurately reflect reality.

We’ve Been Framed shifts the discussion away from the biotech lobby’s hollow promises and technical arguments that few people understand, towards universal values such as fairness and choice. Narratives and language have been a key tool in making newer GM techniques seem more acceptable, so they also need to be part of our response.

Working with a range of stakeholders, GM Freeze undertook a strategic analysis of how our perceptions of GM are shaped and what we can do to counter the bias embedded in the language we receive and use. Welcome to **We’ve Been Framed**, which includes our Top Five Tips for Reframing GM, and a comprehensive guide to communications traps and how to avoid them.

Visit our website at: www.gmfreeze.org/framed

The project was generously funded by the [Network for Social Change](#), and benefited from the input of organisations including [Beyond GM](#), [EcoNexus](#), [Food Matters](#), [Framing Matters](#), [Garden Organic](#), [GM Watch](#), [Organic Farmers & Growers](#), [Public Interest Research Centre](#) and the [Soil Association](#). Thanks to all our collaborators.

Member's Profile ...

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Isy Schultz from GM Freeze caught up with SEEOG Secretary Carole Shorney.

Please tell us a bit about South East Essex Organic Gardeners and your history.

We held our inaugural meeting in the old Southend Central Library in 1994 with a guest speaker from the national organic gardening charity Garden Organic (then the Henry Doubleday Research Association). The Lecture Theatre was packed and there were some cross people who were not allowed to stand at the back!

We set up as one of Garden Organic's local groups, inspired by the books "Gardening without Chemicals" by Jack Temple and "Silent Spring" by Rachel Carson.

The group emerged in the era of the Agenda 21 Biodiversity Action Plans that brought together like-minded people concerned with environmentalism, ecology and activism, so there was considerable collaboration and networking. We worked with organisations such as the South Essex Natural History Society, permaculture groups, allotments, LETS (Local Exchange Trading Systems), Friends of the Earth, Surfers against Sewage, Greenpeace and anti-nuclear campaigns. We also support the work of both the Soil Association and Pesticide Action Network UK.

What is the key motivation for South East Essex Organic Gardeners' activities? In what ways do you feel you are contributing to a more sustainable food system?

Our key motivation is to get everyone growing 'the organic way'; to spread the organic

message: composting organic waste, reducing pollution and protecting and encouraging wildlife. We try to promote a more sustainable food system through our series of bi-monthly talks. This year, we'll have talks including 'Gardening in the Sea: the Essex Seagrass Project' and 'Soil – Geology With Worms'.

And what a wonderful opportunity for us to invite your member supporters in SE Essex! Have a look at the full programme in the March newsletter on our website and please join us!

How is the issue of genetic modification relevant to your organisation?

The issue of genetic modification is completely irrelevant to our organisation because organic gardeners tend to be cautious! Helen Browning, Soil Association Chief Executive, says on their website: "GM is a huge distraction. It is diverting a massive amount of time, effort and attention from the really crucial issues facing food and farming – like looking after our soils. We have already degraded 25 to 40% of soils worldwide and unless we work very hard to reverse this damage, it will be impossible to feed the growing population healthily. GM is dangerous because it allows us to accelerate in the wrong direction for a short while longer."

There are huge worries developing – just have a look on the GM Watch website and there's the headline: "GM purple tomato company targets non-GMO seed company over alleged patent infringement".

These articles are slipping in as if it's the norm. "Why Gardeners Need to Stop Worrying about Non-GMO Seeds" was one I spotted recently on a "real gardeners" website. There's a creeping normalisation of GMOs. If we're not careful, we'll be subscribing to this and that, liking and sharing.

We're hooked when those seeds eventually come on the market because it's all got normal.

Do you have any particular success stories, inspirations or reflections you'd like to share?

Garden Organic's 2023 survey of supporters found that almost 70% of respondents saved some of their own seed, which is encouraging.

Our Seed Potato Day – in partnership with local charity, Trust Links – is our main event. This year we sold over 25 varieties of seed potato (some organic), plus onion sets, shallots, pea and bean seeds, potato fertiliser and chicken pellets! Finished off afterwards by The Essex Asian Women's Association's much loved potato curry!

What are your organisational aspirations?

A steadily growing membership. New committee members taking over from us older ones! Willing volunteers to cover the events we're invited to. The Essex Schools Food and Farming Day at Writtle would be one of these. It's crucial when we remember that Syngenta were there in 2019 handing out toy bees to willing and eager schoolchildren! This is what motivates me!

<https://seeog.org.uk/>

(You're welcome to look us up!)

If you are from a GM Freeze member organisation and would like to be featured here and on our website please get in touch!

What you can do

- Organisations that support our work can join GM Freeze as a member – contact [info\[at\]gmfreeze](mailto:info[at]gmfreeze) for more information.
- If you're an individual that would like to support our work, please consider making a donation.

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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