

Civil society organisations tell government: Regulate new GMOs responsibly

GM Freeze emailed the farming minister Daniel Zeichner in October urging him to act with caution in relation to new forms of genetically modified organisms (GMOs). Laws have been [announced](#) that look set to remove controls over a subset of GMOs that are dubbed 'precision bred' by the British government.

In a parliamentary briefing, GM Freeze has provided a set of recommendations for how new GMOs can be regulated responsibly. These include labelling, traceability and environmental and health-related risk assessments. The briefing is supported by a range of civil society organisations, including the Civil Society Alliance, Compassion in World Farming, the Landworkers' Alliance and the Soil Association.

The government has said that it will simplify the authorisation process so that 'precision bred' plants will be "rolled out across the country". But in a new report, GM Freeze warns of the associated risks, including the fact that all British agricultural producers could suffer losses as a

result of trade barriers.

GM Freeze's Leonie Nimmo said: "Since Labour came to power it has been under intense pressure from the pro-biotech lobby to press ahead with the Conservative's plans for the removal of protections in relation to new GMOs. This seems to have been working, as the fantastic promises the government is making about the benefits of so-called precision bred crops could have been cut and pasted straight from a biotech brochure.

"However, the problems we need to address as a country – including climate change, food security and over-reliance on chemicals for agriculture – are complex, systemic and won't be fixed by twiddling with genes. This type of science won't save us."

Organic Farmers and Growers' Steven Jacobs said:

"It is critical for all non-GM supply chains, including

organic, that the government legislate for co-existence measures. Unlabelled and untraceable new GMOs in our food and farming systems could threaten our ability to fulfil a legal duty to maintain separate supply chains. Government agencies have a duty of care to safeguard the integrity of food systems across the UK."

The Soil Association's Lucia Monje-Jelfs said:

"The briefing produced by GM Freeze provides a comprehensive set of recommendations that will ensure risks are appropriately addressed and consumers can maintain freedom of choice. The government must not ignore the public on these critical issues."

Make your voice heard. Share our report and parliamentary briefing with your MP and in your networks. Go to:

www.gmfreeze.org/press-releases/regulate-new-gmos-responsibly/

For more details see page 4.



Member's Profile:

Real Seeds

Real Seeds is a family-owned company producing high quality seeds for over 25 years, now supplying 400,000 packets a year all over the UK. Based on a small farm in Wales, they are Soil Association registered and only sell open pollinated, non-GM seeds, including many unusual and heirloom varieties. They encourage their customers to save their own seeds too.

... continued on page 2



Image: The Gaia Foundation.

Kate from Real Seeds during an interview with the Seed Sovereignty Programme.

Also in this issue:

- Genetic engineering at the Biodiversity COP: "It was everywhere."
- The campaign against unfair seeds laws.
- Filipino civil society vs. *The Guardian*

And

- Vintage Seeds of Resistance: We want your archive!

Member's Profile ... continued from page 1

Isy at GM Freeze caught up with Kate McEvoy to chat about their work and decades-long experience of a changing agricultural sector.

Please tell us a bit about Real Seeds and its history.

Two of us started Real Seeds in the late 1990s. We'd been growing our own vegetables and realised that most modern varieties had been bred for the needs of large-scale chemical farming. We started swapping and saving seeds of older varieties and others that worked well in a low input organic system, and this developed into a small seed company, which has grown.

What is the key motivation for Real Seeds' activities? In what ways do you feel you are contributing to a more sustainable food system?

All of our seeds are open pollinated, we don't offer any hybrids. Our key aims are to provide gardeners with really good seed, but also very importantly to educate and encourage them to start saving seeds themselves. When we started there were some local seed swaps, the Heritage Seed Library, us, and not much else going on around seed saving. We're now seeing a proliferation of organisations and initiatives. It feels very inspiring.

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

It was once a huge rallying point, with a lot of public concern, activists pulling up GM crops, and mainstream media being alarmist – for once in a useful way. Companies are now pushing back with supposedly different but ultimately the same technologies, and it seems the public have stopped worrying about it. But genetic modification isn't just the wrong answer to the problems of our agricultural system, it's not even answering the right question. We need to be looking at genetically diverse, resilient, open pollinated varieties and populations that will be able to survive and adapt in an increasingly uncertain climate.

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

We've been involved in the UK Seed Sovereignty programme from the start, with the aim of encouraging more small-scale commercial production of organic / agro-ecological vegetable seed in the UK. They have successfully driven the movement out beyond home gardeners, and into the smaller scale, organic commercial sector and have some fantastic projects under way.

What are your organisational aspirations? Where would you like to be in five years' time?

We hope to see the increasing network of small-scale organic seed producers in the UK continue to thrive and grow. We would love to see a move in the direction of agriculture policy away from big-ag and GM and towards small scale agro-ecological food systems. But it's hard to imagine much change coming at government level. Even with the devolved Welsh government and the promises made, a new Sustainable Farming Scheme has been pushed back and some of the most positive aspects of the scheme may be diluted.

But we'll continue to work with organisations like GM Freeze, the Landworkers' Alliance and the Organic Growers Alliance to try to make the case for this shift at UK level and at home in (still officially GM free) Wales.

Anything else you'd like to add?

I'd like to highlight the devolution issues and the contradictions between Welsh GM legislation and the Internal Markets Act. This means that although new-style GMOs (so-called "precision bred organisms" according to the UK government) should be treated as old-style GMOs according to Welsh legislation, if they are sold into Wales from England none of the normal controls (labelling etc) will apply.

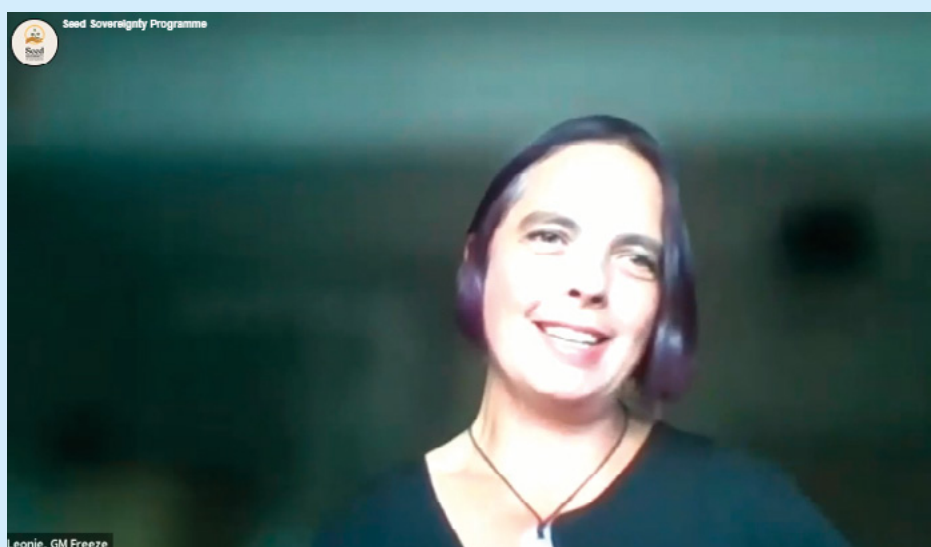
A longer version of this interview is available on our website under 'Member Profiles'.

If you are a member of GM Freeze and would like to be featured here get in touch!

GM Freeze on SeedTV

SeedTV is a webinar series hosted by The Gaia Foundation's Seed Sovereignty Programme, which explores a range of topics in the rich and radical world of seed. GM Freeze's Leonie Nimmo was in the hotseat in September, sharing insights and reflections, and dropping some surprising facts and figures with a quiz. For anyone interested in the complex aspect of seed sovereignty that is genetic engineering, this SeedTV is an excellent resource.

You can catch the programme on: www.seedsovereignty.info/events/seedtv/



Unfair seed laws in trade deals must be stopped – Global Day of Action Against UPOV91

Over 20,000 people have signed a [petition](#) calling for an end to unfair seed laws in UK trade deals, Transform Trade have [announced](#). The petition calls for an end to the International Convention for the Protection of New Varieties of Plants 1991 (UPOV91). Countries are being forced to align their national laws with UPOV91 when signing trade deals with the UK. The results can be devastating for small farmers and are bad for biodiversity, thus undermining our ability to respond to climate change through the development of locally-adapted seeds. **Add your name to the petition to #StopUPOV: www.transform-trade.org/seeds-campaign.**

The 2nd of December was the Global Day of Action Against UPOV91. Angus Lam from GRAIN told us: “The assault on farmers’ seeds is intensifying, driven by powerful seed companies and backed by their host governments through trade deals. On this day of action against UPOV on 2nd December, global communities are standing strong in their resistance.”

Restrictive seed laws introduced in Ghana

UPOV91 can criminalise food producers for sharing, swapping and saving seeds. The below [report](#), published in The Nation, is from Ghana, where in early 2023 journalist Alexander Zaitchik met with farmers as news of restrictive seed trade laws reached rural communities.

“Early one morning, I joined a gathering of seven farmers inside an adobe municipal building on the outskirts of Paga, a market town near Ghana’s border with Burkina Faso. The group had convened at the invitation of Isaac Pabia, the 45-year-old national secretary of the [Peasant Farmers Association of Ghana](#).

When he isn’t tending his cowpea and cassava crops, Pabia travels the country to update his fellow farmers on policy changes affecting smallholder agriculture, still the most common livelihood in sub-Saharan Africa.

“At the top of Pabia’s agenda

was a rumor about provisions in the country’s 2020 seed law. [Early reports](#) indicated that politicians in Accra had criminalized the saving, sharing, and trading of seeds among neighbors or at local markets. Word was spreading that farmers who shared seeds protected by patents—a concept as foreign to most of them as the genetically modified seeds the patents protected – could be sent to prison. Farmers were particularly worried about the government’s expected decision to green-light a genetically modified variety of the cowpea, a staple of West African diets. Was it possible, the farmers asked, that Ghanaian police could be empowered to imprison [cowpea](#) farmers for trading and refining “unregulated” native seed stocks?



Journalist Alexander Zaitchik joins a meeting of farmers in Paga, Ghana, 2023.

“The law is real,” Pabia explained in the local language. “It was written by the companies to control how we use our seed.”

“Picking up a copy of [Ghana’s Plant Variety Protection Act](#) – based on the same draft law as the proposed African Union protocol – he shifted to English and read Section 60, which stipulates penalties. “A farmer who willfully commits an offense,” he read, enunciating slowly, “is liable on summary conviction to a fine of not less than five thousand penalty units... or a term of imprisonment of not less than ten years and not more than fifteen years.”

“The room fell silent as the information settled in the minds of the group. Farmers in northeastern Ghana have been cultivating the cowpea – a protein-rich legume that North Americans know as the black-eyed

pea – since the Bronze Age. How was it possible that people continuing to farm in that lineage, some 5,000 years later, could face 15 years in prison for infringing property claims on crop varieties based on the local original?”

UK Government fails to recognise farmers’ rights

Transform Trade (formerly Traidcraft Exchange) wrote to the Minister for Trade Douglas Alexander MP asking for the UK Government to remove and renegotiate the seed law provisions in its trade deals so that they recognise farmers’ rights to seeds. He refused to recognise this right in his [response](#), re-imagining it as farmers’ ability to access low-cost seed which is “provided” to them.

Human rights in humanity’s interests

UPOV91 is in [opposition](#) to the UN Declaration of the Rights of Peasants, which was adopted in 2018. [According](#) to a report by the Geneva Academy of International Humanitarian Law and Human Rights: “The adoption of UNDROP by the UN General Assembly is a powerful reminder that the human rights to seeds and food must prevail over intellectual property and seed marketing laws and regulations.... Peasants’ rights and peasant seed systems go hand in hand, and are essential to building resilient food and agricultural systems that can adapt to a changing climate.” It concludes that this is not only in the interests of peasants and farmers, but of society at large.



A farmer dries cowpeas in a Ghanaian village.

Responsible or reckless?

The forthcoming regulations for new GMOs

The 2023 Genetic Technology (Precision Breeding) Act created a new legal category for a subset of genetically modified organisms (GMOs) that were named Precision Bred Organisms (PBOs).

GM Freeze has produced a report on what was reckless about the Conservative government's approach to deregulating these new GMOs. We have also sent a briefing to the Labour government with recommendations for how to regulate them responsibly. These recommendations are summarised below; see our website for the full documents.

Recommendations for the responsible regulation of new GMOs:

- Mandate labelling, traceability and co-existence measures; to protect international trade, the autonomy of the devolved nations and the **co-existence of organic and traditionally-bred sectors**; to meet the electorate's demands for transparency and freedom of choice; and to effectively **manage risks** to the environment and health.
- **Exclude wild species and trees**, recognising that unforeseen impacts on the natural environment are high and wide-ranging.
- Require **independent risk assessment** and safety testing of food and feed.
- Address environmental risks and international obligations including the Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety.
- Address **impacts on animal testing**.
- Devise ethical frameworks for animals that have been genetically modified.
- Require **sustainability outcomes** – organisms should be developed for societal benefit.
- Consider the international repercussions of the changing regulations for food security and **Food Sovereignty**.
- Future-proof for emerging technologies, ensuring there is transparency, **public awareness**, and regulatory oversight.
- Address issue of patents, including the potential for **traditional plant breeding and food production to be negatively impacted by PBO patents**.
- Require monitoring and reporting of unintended changes.
- Scientifically define criteria for categorisation of PBOs – i.e. the factors that will determine the difference between a lightly regulated and a virtually unregulated product.
- Collect information to enable the development of **analytical detection methods**.
- Mandate post-market monitoring of precision bred plants as well as animals.
- The Food Standards Agency and Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs to conduct fit-for-purpose impact assessments.

What are Precision Bred Organisms? These are defined as plants and animals that “could have resulted from traditional processes”, but with changes to the genome having been made using “modern biotechnology”. Techniques include but are not limited to gene editing. Precision breeding is not a scientifically meaningful definition and is perhaps best described as a tool to facilitate the removal of existing GMO controls.

The GM Freeze briefing “Regulating new GMOs responsibly” is supported by the following organisations:



GMWATCH



The report, briefing and a summary are available from: <https://www.gmfreeze.org/press-releases/regulate-new-gmos-responsibly/> Send to your MP!

Victory for small farmers in the Philippines; Guardian article reveals colonial mindset

“Today marks a significant victory for the Filipino farmers and people, as well as advocates of food sovereignty worldwide,” [announced](#) MASIPAG in April, as the Philippine Supreme Court [ordered](#) the commercial release of GM rice and aubergines in the country to stop.

MASIPAG is a farmer-led [network](#) of organisations and scientists that has been at the forefront of the Filipino battle against Golden Rice, a GM rice variety with patents [owned by](#) Syngenta. It’s a battle that included the mass [uprooting](#) of an experimental field by 400 people in 2013, and the subsequent [formation](#) of the Stop Golden Rice Network. This pan-Asia network of more than 30 organisations leads the Asian fight against Golden Rice and “the onslaught of corporate control in food and agriculture.”

A very different story

But the news as it was coming out of the Philippines was in stark contrast to the way the Guardian and Observer chose to report the story a few weeks later. “‘A catastrophe’: Greenpeace blocks planting of ‘lifesaving’ Golden Rice,” [shouted](#) the Guardian’s headline, “Thousands of children could die... scientists warn”.

An [opinion piece](#) in the Observer echoed its sister paper’s white-man-as-saviour mindset: “When modified rice could save thousands of lives, it is wrong to oppose it,” the outlet opined. “The green movement’s attempts to block the cultivation of a grain enhanced with vitamin A is misguided.”

But describing opposition to Golden Rice as being from the “green movement” was worse than misguided, it was misleading. It is true that Greenpeace Southeast Asia – Philippines was one of the organisations that petitioned the court, but so were thirteen other petitioners, and MASIPAG was at the helm of the coalition. It was most definitely not Greenpeace UK, which ditched GM as a campaigning issue years ago. This is probably at least partially as a result of very similar attacks, for being populated by “well fed environmentalists”, who were responsible for global suffering.

According to Eliseo Ruzol Jr. from

MASIPAG:¹

“The Filipino people’s victory against Golden Rice and Bt Eggplant is everyone’s victory. It is a testament to the correctness of forwarding farmer-led agroecology and food sovereignty and to the resilience and determination of farmers who have tirelessly defended their rights and sovereignty over their seeds, food systems, biodiversity, and people’s health.”



Image: GRAIN

Whose “science”?

Golden Rice has been genetically modified with material from daffodils and soil to contain a precursor of vitamin A. The Guardian Media Group should state the scientific evidence it used to back up the claim that Golden Rice can help Vitamin A deficiency. It should clarify whether or not it relied on the results of [clandestine](#) trials in China, during which children were fed Golden Rice without the consent of their parents or the authorities and without scientists disclosing the potential risks.

Furthermore, its articles should adequately reflect the interests of the scientists which it quotes, which, in relation to the case in question, were exclusively involved in either the development or marketing of Golden Rice.

Research, recognition and respect, please

MASIPAG responded to the papers with an open letter asking them to respect the knowledge and agency of the Filipino People. It read:

“As Filipino farmers, scientists, development workers, and citizens dedicated to a sustainable, just, and ecologically sound food and agriculture system, MASIPAG cannot stand by The Guardian’s misinformed

and ideologically driven claims that undermine our collective aspirations. Despite overwhelming scientific evidence and the richness of our local and cultural practices, The Guardian has succumbed to the worldview of Golden Rice’s proponents in publishing an article that dismisses the efficacy of our natural vitamin A-rich crops in combating Vitamin A Deficiency (VAD) – these doable, people-led solutions. Moreover, the implicit assertion that our local solutions are backward, not at scale, disjointed from reality, and unscientific while positioning corporate lackeys as the saviours, is both condescending and inaccurate.”

To the best of our knowledge, the Guardian Media Group has ignored this communication, which is regrettable given that this analysis could do much to help the organisation decolonise its narratives. Of particular concern is that the outlets ignored the fact that the court ordered authorities to “obtain the prior and informed consent of farmers and indigenous peoples, and implement liability mechanisms in case of damage, as required by law.”

The bigger picture

It is clear that the pro-biotech lobby has decided to widen the scope of the battle around Golden Rice beyond the fields and courts of the Philippines and back to the hearts and minds of people in the industrialised North. That the supposedly progressive media in the UK is choosing to be its footsoldier in this battle is of significant concern, and something to bear in mind when reading its future articles that relate to biotechnology.

To make a complaint to the Guardian Media Group, email guardian.readers@theguardian.com or observer.readers@observer.co.uk. Get in touch with GM Freeze if you’re interested in collaborating on a collective response.



PAN Asia Pacific and MASIPAG staff oppose Golden Rice during a protest action on October 17 2022.

¹ By email, 5th May 2024.

Genetic engineering at the 16th biodiversity COP



The President of Colombia, Gustavo Petro, calls for a global revolution for humanity to defend life during the opening ceremony of the biodiversity COP16.

“The beginning of the end of life is nigh,” [warned](#) Colombian President Gustavo Petro at the opening ceremony of the UN Convention on Biological Diversity’s (CBD) 16th Conference of Parties (COP) in Cali, Colombia, in October. This biennial UN multilateral process is tasked with the conservation of global biodiversity – “sustaining life on earth”¹ – and is sibling to the more famous climate COP. President Petro used his platform to call for a “global revolution for humanity” to defend life.

Yet Petro’s rallying cry did little to bolster the talks, which ended two weeks later in mess of prolonged negotiations, missed flights and [frustrated](#) attendees. [Photographs](#) of the final plenary show delegates asleep on their desks. Though some [advances](#) were made, in other areas processes were reportedly derailed by corporate interests. This was perhaps no surprise given that company representatives were [embedded](#) in the country delegations of the most powerful – and obstructive – nations, whilst their numbers dwarfed those of some money-poor but biodiversity-rich states.

For those concerned about the unregulated and potentially uncontrollable spread of genetically modified organisms, there was a lot at stake.

Synthetic biology

The CBD has previously agreed a process of horizon scanning, assessment and monitoring of synthetic biology – the design or redesign of new or existing life forms. Whilst this process [survived](#) calls to be completely ‘disestablished’, future work will be scaled down and the focus will [shift](#) to capacity building and development, technology transfer and knowledge sharing. The UN’s end-of-COP summary heavily emphasised the “potential benefits” of synthetic biology and “helping countries” apply such technologies.

Prior to the talks an expert group had assessed five prioritised topics in relation to synthetic biology: artificial intelligence; gene drives to control vector-borne diseases and invasive species; self-limiting insect systems; self-spreading vaccines for wildlife; and inequity in the participation of countries in the Global South. The expert group recommended in-depth

assessments to address governance gaps, but these assessments suffered a blow and will not be conducted – at least not before the next COP.

Gene drives

Gene drives are an extreme form of genetic engineering that are intended to permanently alter or wipe out entire populations of wild species. They have been [proposed](#) or are under development for at least 82 species. A prominent target are mosquitos, which spread diseases including malaria. Alongside disease vectors, research is being conducted into the use of gene drives for agricultural pests and invasive species, including mice, squirrels and starlings.

In addition to what was agreed under the synthetic biology work stream, voluntary risk assessment guidelines for gene drives were [adopted](#) during the conference.² But campaigners have [warned](#) that these are not fit for purpose, as they are based on concepts that are 20 years old. As such they were [designed](#) for annual crop plants “for which spread and persistence is an established risk to be avoided and mitigated against, rather than being an integral and

explicit design intention". There will be no comprehensive independent review of the guidelines, as [advocated](#) by campaign groups. Questions have been [raised](#) over potential conflicts of interest during their development.

Digital sequence information and generative biology

Digital versions of biological "codes", such as DNA or amino acids in proteins, are known as Digital Sequence Information (DSI). It is taken from plants, animals, other organisms and viruses and used by companies to develop products such as drugs and cosmetics. Technology horizon-scanner Jim Thomas [describes](#) it as "the raw commodity powering the global \$1.5 trillion dollar biotech industry."

The headline agreement of COP16 was to create a fund which will channel some of the profits derived from this digital genetic information into conserving some of the plants and animals from which it is taken. [According](#) to the UN, which will administer the fund, this was "a historic decision of global importance" which will mean the benefits of DSI will be shared with "developing countries and Indigenous Peoples and local communities".

But this is a divergence from the discussions on biopiracy (theft of genetic material) that have been a historic feature of the CBD. These were framed in terms of payment for what is taken, with the aim for money to go directly to the source communities and countries rather than via a general fund. Nithin Ramakrishnan, a senior researcher at the Third World Network, [claimed](#) that the fund could in fact promote biopiracy, and pointed to the fact that it undermines a country's ability to control who gets to use its genetic resources.

[According](#) to Thomas, the implications of this 'Cali Fund' stretch beyond biotech to Big Tech – AI giants "who may be most on the hook to pay". Companies such as Google, Microsoft and Amazon are developing AI systems that use DSI to train computers to invent new genomes, viruses, vaccines and more.

This nascent field of generative biology [involves](#) taking two

experimental and unpredictable technologies (genetic engineering and AI), providing them with the power to design life forms, and putting them under the control of some of the most powerful companies on the planet. See the report "Black Box Biotech" for more on the associated risks.

New GMOs

Genetically Modified Organisms (GMOs) are named Living Modified Organisms (LMOs) by the CBD and their release and trade is subject to a supplementary mechanism, the [Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety](#). Key Protocol issues include risk assessment, transboundary movements and public awareness, whilst a [Biosafety Clearing-House](#) facilitates the exchange of information.

The British government has claimed that the Protocol does not apply to organisms it categorises as "precision bred" – those that "could have occurred naturally or been produced by traditional methods."³ These include but are not limited to gene edited organisms. Likewise the EU does [not intend](#) to regulate organisms produced using New Genomic Techniques (NGTs) in accordance with the Protocol.



A ceremony to honour the natural world at COP16

With the deregulation of newer forms of GMOs on the horizon globally, how they are designated under Cartagena is of critical importance, but little has been published about the relevant discussions at COP16. According to Lim Li Ching of the Third World Network, a collection of pro-biotech states did not want to discuss whether gene-edited crops are recognised as LMOs, but a process was set up to facilitate this discussion and the outcomes will be considered in two years' time. By this time it is likely that the deregulation agenda will have led to facts on – or rather crops in – the ground.

A dangerous pivot

Despite all of the above, perhaps the most worrying issue to emerge

from COP16 was the way in which emerging genetic technologies are being positioned as part of the solution to the biodiversity crisis. "Biotechnology was sneaking in everywhere," says Naomi Kosmehl, policy and advocacy coordinator at Save Our Seeds. "It wasn't just where you might expect it in sessions on synthetic biology and gene drives, but also in discussions on health and conservation. "Safe biotech" was being promoted everywhere". The CBD Alliance has also [reported](#) on a push to shift the CBD's focus from regulating biotechnologies to promoting them.

[According](#) to the Alliance for Food Sovereignty in Africa:

"This year, corporate interests have shown up in full force, with companies pushing so-called "nature-positive" solutions that look like 'peace with nature' on the surface but are rooted in market-based schemes that ultimately deepen environmental and social injustices. Synthetic biology, digital sequence information, and biodiversity "credits" sound promising in polished presentations, but behind these buzzwords lies a hidden agenda – one that seeks to commodify nature, to put a price on what is priceless."

Further reading:

Alliance for Food Sovereignty in Africa: [afafrica.org](https://www.afafrica.org)

Black Box Biotech report, available from: www.etcgroup.org/content/black-box-biotechnology

CBD Alliance: www.cbd-alliance.org

Desmog: www.desmog.com

Gene Drive Monitor: genedrivemonitor.org

Scan the Horizon (Jim Thomas) www.scanthehorizon.org

Stop Gene Drives www.stop-genedrives.eu

Testbiotech report on recent developments in genetic engineering: www.testbiotech.org/en/publikation/what-is-a-mammoth-doing-on-mars/

Third World Network www.twn.my

¹ "Sustaining life on Earth: How the Convention on Biological Diversity promotes nature and human well-being," Secretariat of the Convention on Biological Diversity, April 2000.

² This was under the Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety to the Convention on Biological Diversity, a supplementary agreement to the Convention on Biological Diversity.

³ Genetic Technology (Precision Breeding) Bill Explanatory Notes, Houses of Parliament, 2022. Available from: <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/bills/cbill/58-03/0011/en/220011en.pdf>

Changing the future: Our Annual General Meeting...

Our AGM this year was held in the stylish subterranean meeting space of Kraft Dalston in London.

As well as the usual business we had time for some preliminary discussions about our Strategic Plan. This was devised in 2019 so it feels like a good time to review it, and we'll be consulting further with our members, supporters and possibly wider stakeholders in the coming months. In the meanwhile, our existing Strategic Plan can be found on [our website](#). If you have a moment and the inclination please do take a look and get back to us with your thoughts - leonie@gmfreeze.org.

... And a chance to connect, reflect and strategise

In the afternoon we gathered with wider networks for a discussion on 'Changing the future: Civil society action on food & the environment'. It was great to get a real mix of organisations together in one room, and to have a bit of space to think strategically.

Taking a glance backwards, Sophia Greacen from Green Alliance talked us through the Retained EU Law bill, which almost meant thousands of laws governing social and environmental protections would be pushed off a cliff by an arbitrary Brexit deadline. As it was the default cliff edge was removed, thanks to the hard work and determination of civil society organisations, including those in the Greener UK coalition.

To map the new political landscape, firstly Gareth Morgan from the Soil Association gave us an analysis of how the Labour government is shaping up on the environment; the review was mixed. Then Rosalind Stevens from the Civil Society Alliance debriefed us on tensions that have arisen between the UK and devolved governments as a result of post Brexit regulatory strategies, including REUL, and how that impacts on food and environmental standards.

Looking forwards, Carum Basra

Carum Basra with Unchecked UK's deregulation timeline.



from Unchecked UK gave us a heads up on the [protections movement](#), a loose but growing alliance of organisations that are defending the public rights, standards and laws which protect our environment and society from harm.

Taking inspiration from the Landworkers' Alliance gatherings, we democratically decided the rest of the agenda. We discussed how to balance grassroots work with influencing policy, and considered the question, why are we losing? There are big, systemic problems that undermine so much of our work, yet work we must!

An intersectional lens

Before any of this though, Jo and Sola from Odd Arts delivered an interactive session on intersectionality, challenging us to think about how

our different personal, social and political identities combine, overlap and intersect to shape our unique experiences of life.

Our different experiences of things like power, access, discrimination and oppression creates advantages and disadvantages. This understanding provides us with an 'intersectional lens' which can help ensure that our work uproots inequality rather than entrenches it.

We took some time to put those glasses on. The Guardian Media Group's stories on GM rice (page 5) illustrate why we at GM Freeze believe it is so important to decolonise the narrative on genetic modification in particular but also on wider issues in relation to food and the environment.

Thanks to the Andrew Wainwright Reform Trust for supporting the event.

What is a mammoth doing on Mars?

In the lead-up to biodiversity COP16, Testbiotech [published](#) a report on new forms of biotechnology and why they pose risks comparable to human-induced climate change. 'What is a mammoth doing on Mars?' doesn't just explain some of the largely reductionist science of genetic engineering, it also touches on the bigger-picture issues of ecology, evolution, economics and ethics.

What we're seeing on the horizon is a phenomenal array of powerful applications of biotechnologies;

genetic engineering from the microorganism to the biosphere, with humans also in line to be tampered with. And the use of artificial intelligence is set to significantly accelerate these developments.

Want to know what a Xenobot is? Get the report.





The Campaign to STOP GE Trees

Campaign to save the Amazon from Brazil's genetically modified trees

More than 100 organisations from over 30 countries have [demanded](#) that Brazil cancel its planned release of nine genetically engineered (GE) eucalyptus trees and stop threatening global forest biodiversity.

Organisations and Indigenous Peoples from around the world called upon the world leaders at the biodiversity COP16 to demand a strict application of the Convention on Biological Diversity's 2008 *de facto* moratorium on genetically engineered trees.

The trees are designed to withstand the herbicide glyphosate, produce insecticides and grow faster. They "represent a serious threat to biological diversity and ecosystem function as well as to the rights of Indigenous Peoples and local communities," [according](#) to campaigners. The Amazon region is at risk as well as neighbouring countries, where invasive eucalyptus trees already cause harm.

The open letter states that, furthermore: "Brazil's legalization of these genetically engineered trees is a dangerous precedent that threatens to open the door to the widespread commercialization and large-scale release of GE eucalyptus and other GE trees, such as GE pine, across Latin America and around the world."

The genetic modification of trees is of [particular concern](#) given their long life cycle, the number of species they interact with and their ability to spread pollen and seeds over long distances. Their lifespan means that it is impossible to fully assess the long terms risks they may pose to forest ecosystems as well as local communities and indigenous people.



GM Freeze Director Dr. Ricarda Steinbrecher at the 16th CBD COP speaking at a press conference on saving the Amazon from Brazil's GM trees.



African Centre for Biodiversity (ACB). From left to right: Legal Aid South Africa Senior Strategic Litigation Attorney Nzame Skibi, Advocate Nikki Stein, Scientific Consultant Dr Angelika Hilbeck, Advocate Karrisha Pillay and ACB Director Mariam Mayet.

David defeats Goliath in South Africa

The commercial approval of a GM maize that is claimed to be drought tolerant has been quashed in South Africa "after nine long years of arduous litigation" by the African Centre for Biodiversity (ACB).

The ACB [claimed](#) that authorities rubber-stamped Monsanto's application for authorisation of MON87460, "uncritically accepting its paucity of evidence that the genetically modified organism (GMO) poses no threat to human health or the environment and ignoring the contrary expert evidence tendered by ACB's experts."

The precedent-setting decision by the South African Supreme Court of Appeal in October overruled the GMO Act Executive Council, an Appeal Board, a Minister and a 2023 High Court judgement. It was a ruling in favour of the applicability of the precautionary principle.

[According](#) to the European Network of Scientists for Social and Environmental Responsibility (ENSSER), which supported the ACB in the case: "biotech companies typically submit the same data of the same experiments for a particular GM crop to all regulators in different jurisdictions... including the EU and its member states, which are also legally obliged to apply the precautionary principle." It called on European jurisdictions to consider the bearing of the case, noting that they had also been criticised for failing to implement the precautionary principle.

Image: Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy.



The genetic diversity of Mexican corn.

Mexico-USA corn trade dispute resolution expected

In 2023 Mexico issued a decree to restrict the use of genetically modified corn in tortillas and other minimally processed corn products, and to phase out the use of glyphosate.

This sparked a trade dispute with the USA, which sought to challenge the decision under the U.S.-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA). As of early December 2024, a decision on the case was imminent.

Mexico imports GM corn from the United States which is used largely to feed livestock, but Mexican authorities are concerned by the potential impacts on human health if the corn is consumed directly. This concern was vindicated by Mexico's National Council for Humanities, Science and Technology (CONAHCYT), which released new scientific analysis in November 2024.

[According](#) to the U.S. Right to Know, "Mexico's stand for food sovereignty and the scientific evidence they gathered to support their case have worldwide relevance, as nations across the Global South [grapple with seed laws](#) that would open the doors to GM foods." It describes the scientific analysis as among the most thorough reviews to date of the evidence on the health risks of GM corn and glyphosate.



An anti-GMO rally in Mexico City.

Image: REUTERS/Bernardo Montoya

African Faith Leaders demand reparations from Gates: Ending the harm of the Green Revolution

Over 150 African faith, farming, and environmental leaders came together in August to demand reparations for the harm caused by the agricultural policies promoted and funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and AGRA. The delivery of a co-signed [letter](#) was timed to influence the Africa Food Systems Forum in Rwanda, whose partners included the Gates Foundation, the Rwandan government, agribusiness companies and aid organisations.

The Gates Foundation is the co-founder and [biggest donor](#) of AGRA (formerly the Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa). AGRA also [receives funding](#) from private partners including the agro-chemical giant

Bayer (which now includes Monsanto); states including the UK and USA; the UN's Environment Programme and Development Programmes and the World Bank's Global Environment Facility. It does not list any civil society or farmer organisation partners.

The letter, which was organised by the Southern African Faith Communities' Environment Institute (SAFCEI), [states](#) that Gates/AGRA interventions are "further pushing Africa's food system towards a corporatized model of industrial agriculture, diminishing our people's right to food sovereignty and threatening ecological and human health."

It highlights the fact that the industrial agricultural models promoted

rely on chemical inputs, which pollute ecosystems whilst leaving farmers vulnerable to market shocks. Environmental degradation has cumulative impacts, as farmers move to new land if they lack the resources to rehabilitate what has been destroyed. "Any intervention that threatens ecosystem health or removes agency from already strained communities is not acceptable," it states.

Signatories call on the funding to AGRA to stop and for reparations to be made in the form of support for agroecological farming and local knowledge systems and investment in participatory farmer-led research and community seed banking. The press conference can be viewed [online](#).

A global movement to stop GM wheat

Over 100 Global South organisations [appealed](#) to UN Special Rapporteurs in January to block the cultivation and trade of GM wheat developed in Argentina. The alliance included food sovereignty activists, social movements of peasants and indigenous peoples, and academics from Latin America, Africa, and Asia.

Their submission covered human rights, the environment, food, toxic chemicals, water and sanitation, poverty, indigenous peoples, and health. "Introducing GM wheat into agricultural and food systems is akin to putting out a fire with gasoline, since it will advance the industrial agriculture frontier into marginal areas and local communities," according to the alliance. "This will, in turn, put greater pressure on fragile ecosystems and encourage further deforestation, land enclosures, and land and resource grabs, undermining the right to self-determination of local and indigenous communities, especially in Brazil, Argentina, and Paraguay."

The GM wheat, HB4, was developed by Bioceres, a company usually described as Argentinian but which has a complex ownership structure with linked companies in the tax havens of the Cayman Islands and the US state

of Delaware. Its strategic investors have included Monsanto (now Bayer), with which it has also [collaborated](#) "for the deregulation of HarvXtra™ Alfalfa with Roundup Ready® Technology in Argentina". It has "strategic alliances" with Syngenta and Dow AgroSciences. Cristina Fernández de Kirchner, the former President of Argentina whose tenures were plagued with corruption scandals, is a [shareholder](#) of Bioceres and is reported to own part of one of its patents.

HB4 is claimed to be drought-tolerant – not only by its developers but by an increasing number of supporters worldwide. In apparent contrast to claims that genetic engineering could be a tool to mitigate climate change, there are very few crops under development about which such claims are made. There is no single drought-resistant gene; crops are infinitely more



Image: Green America



Cristina Fernández de Kirchner, the former President of Argentina

complex than that, and their resilience to changeable weather patterns depends on a variety of external factors also. So the case has global significance: it seems that whenever anyone needs an actual example of a climate-change busting crop, HB4 is held up.

HB4 is also tolerant to the herbicide glufosinate. This has raised concerns that it will increase the use of this agROTOXIN, which has been linked to a range of adverse health and environmental effects, including brain damage.

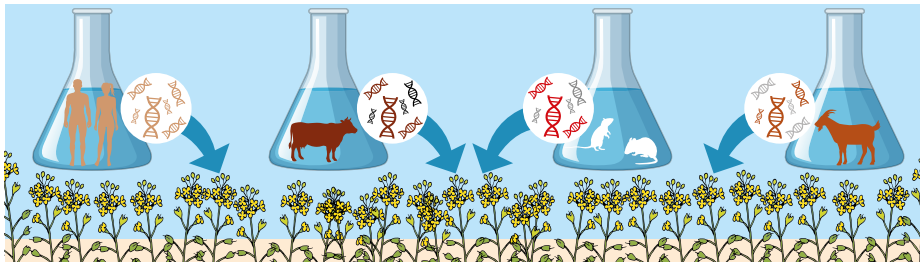
HB4 has been [approved](#) for production in Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay and the United States, and for eating in Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, Nigeria, Thailand, Indonesia, Colombia, Chile and the United States. It is being field tested in Canada.

Camelina trials are stepped up following DEFRA green light

Back in March the Department of Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) gave the [go-ahead](#) for Rothamsted Research's continuing experiments with GM Camelina but failed to release key information about the trials. We do know that they will involve a one-acre site in Suffolk and 650 m² in Hertfordshire for the next four and a half years.

GM Freeze supporters generously funded our [objections](#) to the original application, which we believe have contributed to significant revisions. However, the government has not published the revised application submitted by Rothamsted, so we do not know the current scope of the trial, in particular, which genes copied from which animals will be transferred into the plants. The original application stated that synthetic copies of genes from humans, cattle, goats and mice may be used.

We are particularly concerned



about the lack of reference to the ethical dimensions of the trial in any of the government's published documentation, given the range of potential genetic material that may be used in the experiments. Ethics were a focus of our objections, but DEFRA did not publish these or any of the other objections it received.

However, GM Freeze has obtained from DEFRA the representations made by members of the public, and we now know that it received 152 complaints covering a wide variety of issues.

Rothamsted is also likely to be developing camelina with modified genes under the 'Qualifying Higher Plant' (QHP) authorisation route. This is a process that was facilitated by a 2022 [amendment](#) to the regulations governing GMOs, which is only available for trials for research purposes, and not for plants that are marketed (though presumably they will be in future). This means that the company needs to provide very little information about the trials and this is not subject to scrutiny or risk assessment. Two notifications of camelina categorised as QHPs

appeared on the public register in November 2024, but we know virtually nothing about them – including who is conducting them or where they are taking place.

PROBITY trials to ramp up production of seeds of new GMOs

In October new UK GM seed multiplication trials were announced for wheat and barley that have been gene edited. The open-air trials will [involve](#) the scaling up of one kilogramme of seed to a hundred tonne batch. It represents a "serious escalation of the government's plans to push genetically modified gene-edited (so called "precision-bred") crops onto the marketplace," [according](#) to Beyond GM.

PROBITY stands for a 'Platform to Rate Organisms Bred for Improved Traits and Yield'. It is a three-year project funded to the tune of £2.2m by taxpayers, via DEFRA. It is led by the British On-Farm Innovation Network (BOFIN) and the mix of private and public project partners include Rothamsted Research, the John Innes Centre, the University of Nottingham, UK Agri-Tech Centre, Cereal Partners Worldwide, Nestec York Ltd, First Milk, and Aberystwyth University.

European retailers call for freedom of choice

Hundreds of European retailers and food producers [petitioned](#) the EU Council in September calling for new GMOs to be labelled. The 376 companies included the third largest food retailer in the EU, REWE Group; the leading retailer in Austria, SPAR Austria; Europe's largest drugstore chain, dm-drogerie markt and the world's largest organic supermarket chain, Biocoop.

"Across Europe, companies see their entrepreneurial freedom threatened by the EU Commission's plans to deregulate so-called new genomic techniques (NGTs) or new GMOs," according to the German Association Food without Genetic

Engineering (VLOG). "They are therefore appealing to the EU Agriculture Council to stand up for transparency, freedom of choice and fair competitive conditions along the entire value chain."

The demands included labelling, traceability, coexistence and liability rules, whilst the concerns of the signatories included the potential loss of export markets and the threat to the existence of non-GMO production systems.

As 2025 approaches, plans to deregulate NGTs in Europe are blocked at the European Council, with the issue of patents reportedly thus far unresolved. Alexander



Hungary's Minister of Agriculture and current EU Council President for Agriculture and Fisheries, Dr István Nagy (r), accepts the Open Letter from Gunther Weiss (l), Head of Quality Management, Alnatura GmbH.

Hissing, Managing Director of VLOG, [told](#) Feed Navigator that this could change in 2025 when Poland assumes the Council's presidency. Poland has until now been a blocking country due to its opposition to patents. Its position will be critical, according to Hissing.

Seeking archive material: Vintage Seeds of Resistance!

Were you involved in anti-GMO campaigns back in the day? Have you got any photos, videos, leaflets or memories that you'd like to share? If so, GM Freeze wants to hear from you!

We're heading to the Oxford Real Farming Conference in January with a plan. We're going to gather together people who have – at some point in their journeys – campaigned against genetically modified organisms, with people of a younger generation who may be wondering what all the fuss was about. Whether you are curious, or a vintage campaigner, we'd love you to join us.

Drawing on archive material and dusting off memories, we'll be exploring what made the GM campaign so extraordinary – and so successful that it stopped a whole industry in its tracks.

What ignited fires of resistance then, and what has changed? What can the food activists of today learn from the campaigners of yesterday? Are concerns about GM a thing of the past too, or should we be mobilising again against a new wave of GM?

Any archive material that is gathered will be shared with the [History of Resistance](#) archive and exhibition project afterwards (with



Were you there? Have you got pics? Get in touch!

consent). Please contact info@gmfreeze.org if you've got material you'd like to share, or to let us know you'll be joining us for a spot of reminiscing.

Support our work and subscribe!

This newsletter is brought to you by GM Freeze. If you'd like to receive it in future and are not currently a supporter, please consider subscribing. Annual fees start at £12; our standard supporter fee is £36 but you can give us more if you like! You can choose to receive a digital or paper copy, and can even send us a cheque!

Post this form back with your cheque: **OR** Digital options to join or renew:

Name: _____

Address: _____

Postcode: _____

Email: _____

Permission to add email to mailing list:

Amount enclosed: _____

Tick here if you would only like to receive a digital (pdf) version of this newsletter

● Go to www.gmfreeze.org/join_us and enter your details.

● Or make bank transfers or set up standing orders to:

Account name: GM Freeze

Sort code: 08 92 99

Account number: 653 483 41

If you'd like to pay monthly we ask for a minimum fee of £1 a month for unwaged but our standard subscription is £3 a month.

Please send us your name and address and/or email address and paper and/or digital mailing preferences.

Help us grow our membership

Are you part of an organisation that works for justice and sustainability in the food system? Might your organisation be interested in becoming a member of GM Freeze? See www.gmfreeze.org/membership for more info or get in touch to discuss. Fees are calculated according to turnover and start at £40, though we can offer a reduced price to organisations for which costs are a barrier to participation.

GM Freeze works for a world in which our food is produced responsibly, fairly and sustainably. We advocate for Food Sovereignty and justice in the food and farming systems. 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 and we oppose the patenting of genetic resources.

GM Freeze, Todmorden College, Burnley Road, Todmorden, West Yorkshire, OL14 7BX.
info@gmfreeze.org

Join our email list: www.gmfreeze.org/join_us/email-signup

0845 217 8992. Calls to this number will cost 3p per minute plus your telephone company's Access Charge. We use an 0845 phone number for the privacy of our staff.

12 Thin Ice: GM Freeze Campaign newsletter / Issue 68, December 2024

 /GMFreezeUK

 @gmfreeze

 /gmfreezeuk/

 GM Freeze

www.gmfreeze.org