

Food Fight in a Time of Crisis

Quotes of the Month:

“There are 800 million hungry people in the world; 34,000 children starve to death every day. There are those who consider this a tragedy, and then there are the biotech companies and their countless PR firms, who seem to consider it a flawless hook for product branding. It is an insult of the highest and most grotesque order to turn those who live from day to day into the centerpiece of an elaborate lie [i.e. that biotech crops will feed the world]. The companies who make [GE foods], and the flacks who hawk their falsehoods, offer us a new definition of depravity, a new standard to plunge for in our race to care least, want more, and divest ourselves of all shame.”

Michael Manville, “Welcome to the Spin Machine”
<www.freezerbox.com/archive/2001/04/biotech/>

“The outlook [for the Genetically Engineered food industry] is less certain than it was three years ago. The euphoria has gone. Growth has fallen significantly. The industry has overstated the rate of progress and underestimated the resistance of consumers.”

Sergey Vasnetsov, a leading chemical industry analyst with Lehman Brothers, quoted in The Guardian (UK) 9/26/01

Biotech Bullies: Business as Usual

Agbiotech and corporate special interests in reaction to stubborn global resistance have stepped-up their propaganda and bullying. This aggression is evident in the media, the marketplace, the trade and diplomatic fronts, the legislatures, courts, patent offices, and the streets of the cities where anti-globalization protests have taken place. Recognizing that a critical mass of youth, consumers, farmers, environmentalists, and public interest nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) all over the world are rejecting not only the biotech and industrial agriculture model, but also the entire “Free Trade” globalization agenda itself, the Gene Giants and their allies know they are losing ground. Reacting to massive demonstrations in Seattle, Washington, Quebec, Sweden, and Genoa—with anti-Frankenfoods concerns often in the forefront-governing elites have clamped down and repressed youthful protestors, and have begun shifting their meetings to inaccessible locations such as the oil sheikdom of Qatar, where the 142 nation members of the World Trade Organization (WTO) are scheduled to hold a ministerial meeting November 9-13.

Since September 11, with public attention focused on terror attacks and the war in Afghanistan, White House operatives have done their best to: sabotage stringent safety testing of genetically engineered (GE) foods and crops in the WTO Codex Alimentarius negotiations in Vancouver; pressed Congress forward for “Fast Track” Presidential negotiating authority to enable Bush to expand the power of the WTO and spread Free Trade fundamentalism throughout the Americas; inserted language into the Fast Track bill that would ban mandatory labeling of gene-altered foods and the use of the precautionary principle; increased pressure on the EU to lift its moratorium on genetically modified organisms (GMOs); and threatened Thailand and other nations seeking to ban or label GE crops. (See OCA’s website www.organicconsumers.org for details on these stories and other news items referred to in this issue).

Monsanto, meanwhile, has tightened its stranglehold over the agbiotech and seed sector. The company in April was awarded a wide-ranging, controversial patent from the US Patent office on all antibiotic resistant marker genes (found in nearly all GMO crops) and continues to move forward to gain a similar monopoly patent on *Agrobacterium tumefaciens*, a vector (sort of a cellular taxi) used widely in gene-splicing. Monsanto is also requiring strict licensing and royalty agreements for scientists carrying out research

on the genetic structure or genome of rice—for which the company holds a patent. (See www.rafi.org)

On the intimidation front, Monsanto continues to press legal charges against several hundred North American farmers for the “crime” of saving their seeds without paying a royalty payment to Monsanto. After gaining a precedent setting court conviction against Saskatchewan farmer Percy Schmeiser in March, unjustly accused of growing Roundup Ready canola which had actually drifted onto his fields from adjoining farms growing GE crops, Monsanto set up a toll-free “snitch line” in Canada, advertised on radio stations, for farmers to “turn in” their seed-saving neighbors. After protests the snitch line was disconnected. A similar snitch line was set up in the US several years ago.

GMO Sneak Attack Fizzles-USA and Europe

Stubborn opposition by labor, public interest, and environmental groups over the past several years stopped Clinton, and now Bush, from gaining “expedited” “Fast Track” negotiation powers. Fast Track legislation, if approved by Congress, would enable the White House to circumvent public opposition and expand legally binding trade treaties such as the WTO (a treaty which up until now has not been yet fully applied to agriculture). Fast Track would also help Bush implement new corporate-instigated trade regimes such as the so-called Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA). Under Fast Track procedures, Congress can only vote yes or no on new treaties proposed by the White House, giving up for five years the power to modify or change trade rules, even when these regulations supercede or nullify local, state, or national laws in force in the US or other nations. WTO-imposed rules can nullify laws such as those protecting sea dolphins or turtles; import laws providing support for sustainable small farms in the developing world; laws banning hormone-tainted beef; laws regulating GMOs; or laws banning city or state purchases from sweatshops or making investments in companies doing business with dictatorships such as Burma.

Polls conducted several years ago by Ralph Nader’s organization, Public Citizen, revealed that 2/3 of Americans oppose global trade agreements such as the WTO once they understand that these trade agreements essentially establish new global economic laws which benefit large corporations while reducing the sovereign power of ordinary citizens and their elected representatives.

With Bush’s Commander in Chief persona and popularity, at an all time high, at least temporarily, the White House has decided that now is the time to push through a GMO-friendly version of Fast Track and to increase the pressure on the EU and other nations to lift their restrictions on GE foods and crops. All this, while most of the public and the media are preoccupied, and while those that oppose unregulated globalization, Frankenfoods, and expanded

rights for transnational corporations can be branded as “unpatriotic.”

As Robert Zoellick, US Trade Representative, stated in a Sept. 24 speech: “This President and this Administration will fight for open markets and free trade. We will not be intimidated by those who have taken to the streets to blame trade—and America—for the world’s ills.” At the same time Bush’s USDA has begun to make its first moves to degrade organic standards, appoint advocates of industrial agriculture to the National Organic Standards Board, and prepare the groundwork for a gradual takeover of the organic industry by corporate agribusiness. (More on this in the next issue of [BioDemocracy News](#).)

On Oct. 3, the Chairman of the powerful House and Ways Committee introduced a Fast Track bill in the Congress. This bill not only gives Bush expanded powers to negotiate trade agreements, but is also designed to “eliminate practices that unfairly decrease US market access opportunities, including unjustified trade restrictions such as labeling, that affect new technologies, including biotechnology.”

The [Wall Street Journal](#) reported on Oct. 8 that EU authorities, in a significant concession to White House pressure, had agreed to push for an end to the GE food and crop moratorium that has been in place in Europe for the past three years.

Lifting the GE foods moratorium has drawn near-unanimous condemnation from the European public. As Adrian Bebb of the UK Friends of the Earth put it, “The EU is trying to rush ahead, under pressure from the US and the GM industry, disregarding concerns about public health and the environment. The gentlemen’s agreements that it is proposing with industry are likely to be worthless, and, in any case, the public will resist having these products forced upon them.” ([London Independent](#) 10/7/01).

At an international meeting in Washington Oct. 23, EU officials deflated the Bush administration’s hopes, pointing out that public pressure makes it extremely unlikely that the EU GMO moratorium will be lifted before 2003—at the earliest, and perhaps not at all, if the US continues to stubbornly embrace its no-labeling/no crop segregation policy. Tony Van Der Haegen, EU minister for agriculture, stated “Labeling is an issue for political judgment and is necessary to ensure transparency so as to restore consumer confidence and allow for consumer choice. Unless we restore EU consumer confidence in this new technology, genetic modification is dead in Europe.” ([InterPress](#) 10/24/01)

Bush’s push for Fast Track appears to have similarly fizzled, with analysts in Washington predicting that the Fast Track debate will continue in January.

Other Agbiotech Aggressions

Fast Track lobbying and diplomatic arm-twisting is just the tip of the iceberg. Other recent moves by government and industry on the biotech front include the following:

- Don't worry about the monarchs. Based on incomplete and short-term (industry-funded) studies, the global media dutifully reported in September that GE corn doesn't kill a "significant" number of monarch butterflies. The Gene Giants were shaken by studies published in 1999 showing that Bt corn pollen killed monarch butterflies. Never mind that the same indentured scientists who reached the recent "don't worry" conclusion admitted that one variety of GE corn now to be taken off the market does indeed kill monarchs and their relatives. Never mind that Bt corn kills beneficial soil microorganisms and beneficial insects such as the lacewing or ladybug. And never mind that all GE herbicide resistant crops, such as corn or soybeans sprayed with Roundup or other broad spectrum herbicides, kill the monarch caterpillar's sole food source, the milkweed plant. In addition, as Dr. Rebecca Goldberg, a public interest biotech expert, told the [New York Times](#) Sept. 9, the recent monarch studies are based upon short-term observations, and thus are unlikely to detect "long-term sub lethal" damage to the monarchs or their relatives.
- Over the objections of public interest groups, the US Environmental Protection Agency in October gave the green light to reregister or continue to allow the massive cultivation of Bt cotton and corn crops. EPA approval was made despite mounting evidence that Bt crops damage the environment, harm public health, and threaten the use of non-GE Bt sprays, which are essential biopesticide control agents in organic and low-chemical input agriculture.
- Genetic pollution in Mexico. [Nature](#) magazine (10/11/01) reported that Mexico's irreplaceable traditional and heirloom corn varieties are becoming contaminated with GE Bt corn. Although the Mexican government has repeatedly declared that growing GE corn in the country is prohibited, given that the nation is the world center for corn biodiversity with 25,000 varieties, scientists have recently discovered gene-altered corn growing in 15 rural communities in the southern state of Oaxaca. Mexican authorities, despite a supposed ban on growing GE corn, have allowed US grain exporters like Cargill to dump massive quantities of US corn (much of which since 1996 has been GE) on the Mexican market, supposedly only for human food and animal consumption, but which obviously now has been planted or cultivated across the country. Dr. Doreen Stabinsky from Greenpeace USA described this contamination of traditional varieties as "only the tip of the iceberg" and warned that "the international community must agree on immediate preventative measures to avoid further contamination."
- Reuters reported Sept. 19 that Monsanto and the US government, despite widespread opposition from farmers and the Canadian Wheat Board, are pushing ahead to secure approval for the commercialization of GE wheat. Over 200 Canada farm groups sent a letter to Ottawa on July 31 stating that "Overwhelming numbers of Canadian farmers and consumers, as well as customers for Canadian wheat overseas, have said they do not want GMO wheat." US wheat farmers in North Dakota and other states have expressed similar sentiments, warning that GMO contamination of US crops will damage the nation's billion dollar export market for wheat, much as US corn and soybean exports have already been damaged.
- Greenpeace reported on Sept. 7 that open field trials of GE rice containing human genes are now being conducted in California. Kimberly Wilson, spokeswoman for Greenpeace, stated that "There is just no excuse to allow drug producing crops to be grown out in the fields where they can contaminate the environment and the food chain." Reuters reported Sept. 4 that the Asian nation of Sri Lanka had backed off on its policy banning GE crops, under major pressure from the US and the World Trade Organization. The [Bangkok Post](#) (9/27/01) described a similar situation in Thailand, where heavy pressure has been applied on the government to suspend its ban on field-testing GE crops.
- Bt cotton, up until now illegal in India, has been found growing on 25,000 acres in the state of Gujarat. E. A. Siddiq, chairman of an Indian Department of Biotechnology committee that monitors transgenic crops, says: "This is a foretaste of a frightening situation where transgenics will be out of control and all over the place." ([Nature](#) 10/11/01)
- Ignoring the will of 90% of the population, Canadian Members of Parliament voted Oct. 17, against mandatory labeling of GE foods. ([Ottawa Citizen](#) 10/18/01)
- 800 organic soybean farmers rallied in Belem, Brazil to accuse gunmen working for large ranchers of murdering eight of their members who had spoken out strongly against GE soybeans. GE soybeans are illegal in Brazil, despite massive pressure by Monsanto, the American Embassy, and a number of large ranchers and landholders. ([London Independent](#) (10/8/01).
- Monsanto warned US corn farmers in late-October that commercial strip tests will not be able to detect at least one variety of the company's new herbicide resistant (Roundup Ready) corn. Despite last year's debacle over likely allergenic StarLink corn illegally getting into the food supply, which resulted in a massive recall of over 300 brand name food products and precipitated a steep decline in US corn export sales, Monsanto continues to push ahead for approval to plant new GE crops, even

when these crops are not approved for commercialization in key overseas markets such as Europe and Japan. (Associated Press 10/24/01)

- In a briefing for journalists Oct. 4, the American Medical Association (AMA) put together a panel of industry-sponsored researchers who claimed that GE foods could be produced which enhance health, have better nutrition, alleviate world hunger, reduce allergenicity, and carry vaccines to combat disease. ([Biotechnology Newswatch](#) 10/15/01). The AMA in the past has been accused of being a cheerleader for Monsanto and the biotech industry. The British Medical Association, on the other hand, has called for a global moratorium on GE foods and crops, maintaining that they have neither been proven safe for human health nor the environment.

- The industry think tank, International Service for the Acquisition of Agri-biotech Applications (ISAAA), trumpeted on Oct. 18 that global acreage of GE crops continues to grow-with a projected total of 125 million acres under cultivation by the end of 2001. What the ISAAA fails to highlight however is that GE crop acreage has drastically leveled off in the last 24 months after years of doubling and redoubling. In 2000 there was only an 8% growth in GE crops. The ISAAA also failed to mention that three, and only three, countries (the US, Canada, and Argentina) continue to produce 98% of the world's Frankencrops-which still include only four major industrial crops (soybeans, corn, canola, and cotton), with one company, Monsanto, holding patents on 80% of all cultivated GE crops.

- The US Department of Agriculture has announced that it will license the notorious Terminator technology to its seed industry partner, Delta & Pine Land Co. The USDA and D&PL are co-owners of three patents on the controversial technology that genetically modifies plants to produce sterile seeds, preventing farmers from re-using harvested seed. (For details, see www.rafi.org)

GMO Resistance Continues

Despite aggressive moves by industry and the White House, global resistance against Frankenfoods continues to mount. Among recent blows to the biotech century are the following:

- [Feedstuffs](#) magazine reported on Oct. 23 that, due in large part to the global controversy over GMOs, 50% of all US grain exporters plan to segregate genetically engineered and non-genetically engineered (sometimes called "identity preserved") grains next year. In the year 2000 only 10% of US grain exporters were segregating (Reuters 8/15/00). This year the figure will rise to 25%, and next year, according to Jim Voight, vice president of operations for Archer Daniels Midland Co, the figure will rise to 50%. ADM is currently paying non-GMO corn growers a premium price (between 10-20 cents per bushel) for corn and

soybeans. Most GE corn and soybean exports end up in animal feed. Currently 25% of all animal feed in the EU is non-GMO. This percentage is expected to rise sharply over the next 12 months-making it more difficult for US, Canadian, and Argentine grain exporters to sell GE grains to the EU. 80% of Britons in a recent poll said they wanted meat from animals fed GE grain to be labeled.

- A similar dynamic is unfolding in Asian markets. "We won't consider buying US corn for another year or so," said Kim Bong-Chan of South Korean starch producer Samyang Genex Co. "Customers in Korea have a bad feeling [about] all GM products..." (Reuters 9/7/01)

- According to Dan McGuire of the American Corn Growers Association (press release 10/16/01) "While some in the U.S. grain industry have apparently been operating under the naïve notion that the European Union could be forced to cave in to US pressure and be told that they had to buy what some in the US 'insist' they buy, it's time to let go of that illusion and put grain buyer demands well above biotech company, GMO seed and chemical sales agendas."

- Canadian organic farmers announced in October that they plan to sue genetic engineering companies who are marketing GE canola and polluting their fields. ([Saskatoon Star Phoenix](#) 10/19/01) In a related story Canada food industry officials admitted at an industry food conference in Ontario Sept. 27 they are "losing ground on the GMO issue"-due to widespread consumer opposition.

- Brazil announced in August it was backing off on legalizing the planting of Monsanto's Roundup Ready soybeans, despite major pressure from the US. (Reuters 8/9/01)

- According to a report published by John Vidal in the UK [Guardian](#) (08/28/01), genetic engineering companies are investing less in research than five years ago. Profits are static, countries are tightening up labeling and import laws, the promised new generation of crops, which claim to bring health benefits, are still three or four years away, and no major new markets are expected to develop. Monsanto, whose GE seeds were planted on 80 million acres last year, has had to slash costs, cut back on research and fire almost 700 people. However Monsanto is still conducting field trials in many developing countries and has reported an increase in acreage devoted to GMO crops.

- Imports of US corn used in Japanese food products have declined significantly over the past several months, due to the continuing controversy over GE food. ([Nikkei Weekly](#) 10/25/01) Instead Japan's food makers are turning to non-GMO corn, soy, and canola exports from Brazil, China, Australia, South Africa, and Argentina. The recent discovery of several Japanese cows infected with Mad Cow Disease-attributed to contaminated animal feed imported into the country-have further alarmed consumers and

fueled the nation's already volatile anti-Frankenfoods sentiments.

- Swiss biotech giant Novartis admitted (Reuters Oct. 4) that the company's Gerber baby food sold in the Philippines contained genetically modified soy. Novartis stressed the products were safe but added that it was seeking a new supplier. Novartis had previously pledged to Greenpeace and other pressure groups that its Gerber baby food line in the EU and the US was guaranteed free of GE ingredients. The company has come under criticism from Monsanto and grocery trade associations for "caving in" to consumer pressure.

- Friends of the Earth, the Organic Consumers Association, and other members of the Genetically Engineered Food Alert (GEFA) warned the Environmental Protection Agency in a press release on Sept. 21 <gefoodalert.org> that all Bt corn, potatoes, and cotton products, not just StarLink corn, may be allergenic or harmful to humans. According to Larry Bohlen of Friends of the Earth (UPI 9/21/01): "The EPA is supposed to base its reassessment on 'the most current health and ecological data,' incorporating 'all available scientific information on Bt products,' in particular the recommendations of its scientific advisory panels and the National Academy of Sciences report on pest-protected plants," Bohlen wrote. "As detailed in our submission to the EPA, the agency has failed to do this." Bohlen said the toxins produced by Bt corn either have characteristics that make them possible human allergens or have never been assessed for such characteristics. He said the data collected on potatoes and cotton also is lacking.

- GEFA and the OCA's statement on the potential human health hazards of Bt crops comes in the wake of warnings by other scientists, as well as field reports from farmers in the midwestern US. Dr. Arpad Pusztai, perhaps the most well-known and respected critic of GE food hazards in Europe, warned in 1999 that the Bt toxin (gene-spliced into GMO corn, potatoes, and cotton) comes from the same chemical family as the snowdrop lectin, which turned out to be poisonous to lab animals in his widely publicized experiments with GE potatoes. The GE snowdrop lectin-spliced potatoes, among other things, damaged the digestive system of rats, fueling concerns that perhaps all Bt foods might do the same to humans. In a similar vein, farmers have reported (in Acres USA magazine) for several years that cows and other animals, including deer, have been seen walking through patches of Bt corn (refusing to eat it) to graze on non-GE corn. Stay tuned to BioDemocracy News for further developments on the toxicity of Bt corn.

- A class action suit has been filed in Tennessee, similar to suits already filed in six other states, to recover millions of dollars in damages from Aventis for the StarLink corn debacle of the past year. (The Tennessean 9/9/01)

- On Sept. 13 the African nation of Zimbabwe warned GE exporters not to send GE food or crop seeds into the country without the prior approval of the nation's Biosafety Board. (Agence France 9/13/01)

- A national anti-GE coalition leafleted outside Loblaw's supermarkets in Canada on Sept. 9. The coalition, spearheaded by the Council of Canadians, Sierra Club, and Greenpeace has been pressuring Loblaw's, the largest supermarket chain in Canada, to remove all GE-tainted products from its brand name line. "Loblaw's sells foods that have been genetically engineered, but without labels indicating they are and we think that's wrong," said Nadia Alexan, co-coordinator of the Montreal Chapter of the Council of Canadians, a group that has been lobbying the federal government to enforce labeling on GE foods. "But polls consistently show over the last six years that 93 per cent of Canadians want a mandatory labeling policy."

- A similar supermarket campaign has been carried out recently in the US, targeting Trader Joe's, an upscale chain operating in 13 states. The Trader Joe's campaign in the US has been led by Greenpeace, with participation by the Organic Consumers Association and other groups. Campaigners want Trader Joe's to follow the lead of other chains, such as Whole Foods and Wild Oats, and ban GMOs from their brand name products.

- On Oct. 30 Greenpeace and the OCA, joined by regional RAGE (Resistance Against Genetic Engineering) activists and the Genetic Engineering Action Network (GEAN) carried out a "National Day of Labeling" action against a variety of supermarket chains in 10 major cities across the US. In these cities volunteer "labeling brigades" slipped into supermarkets and placed GMO food labels on selected foods and beverages, paying special attention to GE-tainted products produced by Kraft, Kellogg's, and Starbucks. Supermarket officials, caught off guard, didn't even notice what was happening in most locations, giving protestors up to 30 minutes to label hundreds of products. Stores called the police in several cities, but demonstrators disappeared before police arrived.

- Braving a torrential downpour, 10,000 New Zealanders rallied against GE food and crops in Auckland on Sept. 1. Annette Cotter of Greenpeace summed up the spirit of the crowd: "The overwhelming success of this rally has sent a very clear message to the Government. People of this country want a GE free environment and food chain. Keep GE in the lab." www.organtict.org

- Direct action sabotage of GE crop test plots has continued over the past 90 days, with widely publicized actions taking place in France (led by Jose Bove's Confederation Paysanne), the Philippines, and the UK. Court trials of "crop pullers," especially in the UK continue to generate bad publicity for the GMO industry and sympathy for the protestors.

• Anti-GMO activists in Oregon are making progress in gathering 80,000 signatures to put an initiative on the state ballot for Nov. 2002 that calls for mandatory labeling of all GE foods. Spokespersons for the initiative, Donna Harris and Parker Bell, told BioDemocracy News that they are confident the initiative will get on the ballot and be voted into law, despite strong opposition by corporate agribusiness and the biotech lobby. For more information on the Oregon GMO labeling initiative see www.labelgefoods.org

• More bad news for biotech. A national poll carried out by the Pew Charitable Trust in July found that churchgoing Americans are increasingly opposed to the biotech industry "playing God" and genetically engineering food and living organisms. The recent poll contrasts sharply with polls conducted several years ago, which found support for GE among religious-minded Americans. Pew found 62% of "born again" Evangelicals said they were opposed to GE foods, 57% of Protestants, and 55% of Catholics. Only among the Jewish community did a slight majority (55%) say they supported the technology. In every religious denomination, women were more likely than men to oppose GE food. (Washington Times 7/29/01)

What's Next:

Food & Anti-GE Activism in a Time of Crisis

Despite pro-active moves by the White House and agbiotech interests in the wake of Sept. 11 and the war in Afghanistan, the embattled Biotech Century remains

stillborn. Fast Track has fizzled, at least for the moment. European and Asian politicians still recognize that trying to force untested and unlabeled American and Canadian Frankenfoods down the throats of consumers amounts to political suicide. And even Bush and the global cheerleaders for unfettered Free Trade recognize that using the WTO as a hammer to force GMOs on global Civil Society could destroy the entire WTO agenda. In other words no one seems to be buying the idea that it's your patriotic duty to be a human guinea pig, that we must all shut up and eat our Frankenfoods, that we must get over our queasiness about filthy meat, pesticides, hormones, toxic sludge, agricultural sweatshops, world hunger, greenhouse gas emissions from an evermore globalized and industrial food system, and Mad Cow.

In fact, since Sept. 11, there are signs that consumers are more concerned than ever about what they are feeding their children and themselves. In Japan a Mad Cow crisis grips the country, while even in the US government authorities seem spooked by a Mad Cow-like disease (Chronic Wasting Disease) spreading rapidly among wild and domesticated deer and elk. In the US people are eating out less and cooking at home more. Organic foods worldwide are booming, while food security and world hunger are moving from the back burner of public consciousness to the forefront. In the next issue of BioDemocracy News we will look more closely at the global crisis over food safety and food security. In the meantime stay tuned to our website for daily news and Action Alerts:
www.organicconsumers.org

BioDemocracy News #36, November, 2001 by Ronnie Cummins: News & Analysis on Genetic Engineering, Factory Farming, and Organics
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