

Behind The Mask:

Biotech's Show Their Corporate Teeth

Behind the PR mask, sharp fangs are revealed as the USA threatens Europe with legal action over continued resistance to GM imports. On the horizon, a new technology emerges, which could just change everything. Phil Chandler surveys recent developments in the biotechnology debate.

Just as the wolf's nature is to hunt and kill in packs, so it is the nature of corporations to work together to attack those who threaten their joint interests.

And so the US government, on behalf of its biotech industry, is threatening to invoke World Trade Organisation rules on free trade to force the EU to provide a market for the millions of tons of GM grain produced by US farmers, which is so unsaleable that it has even been refused as food aid by a number of developing countries.

The current US administration has consistently championed the GM cause and is showing signs of increasing impatience over their apparent inability to persuade irritatingly democratic Europeans to swallow their modified agricultural produce.

A republican senator put his point strongly to the White House:

*"I've been beating this drum a long time, and my message is clear. Iowa's farmers are being hurt by the European Union's biotech policies, and this situation is unacceptable. As long as the United States refuses to enforce its WTO rights, American farmers will continue to suffer."*¹

But according to Jagdish Bhagwati, professor of economics at the University of Columbia in New York, *"The WTO is like a royalty protection agency, acting like a Mafia protection racket."*²

But even with such powerful backing, Monsanto is unlikely to repeat their ill-fated attempt to persuade European consumers to buy their GM products. They have concentrated their efforts instead on buying up seed merchants across the developing world.

*"In some places farmers must either purchase GM seeds - and the expensive patent herbicides required to grow them - or plant nothing at all."*³

According to ActionAid's recent report⁴ GM is irrelevant to poor farmers and could be a huge threat.

"Farmers in developing countries are being seduced by the promise of 'magic seeds', and are not told that they will be unable to save and trade their seeds from one harvest to the next. They are being forced into a position where they need to buy expensive chemicals, leading to huge debts they can never hope to pay off."

ActionAid maintains that GM crops will not solve the problems of food insecurity and poverty in developing countries - if anything, they threaten to exacerbate

them. They say that there should be no more commercialisation of GM crops until more research has been carried out on their impact.

RISKY BUSINESS

The EU is likely to further irritate the USA in drawing up new legislation to make farmers and seed companies liable for any damage to biodiversity or human health caused by GM crops. Environment minister Michael Meacher is believed to be in favour of extending liability to cover any losses suffered by organic farmers as a result of GM contamination.⁵

While the biotechs have rejected all attempts to make them liable for any damage their products may cause, the insurance industry is unwilling to take any risks with GM. Policies issued by NFU Mutual, the UK's largest agricultural insurer, specifically exclude cover for "any liability arising from the production, supply, or presence on the premises of any genetically modified crop, where liability may be attributed directly or indirectly to the genetic characteristics of such crop".

*"...no-one knows the risks of growing GM crops in this country and it would be irresponsible of us to provide insurance when we are working in the dark."*⁶

CELTIC REBELLION

While Cornwall has declared itself 'GM-free', both the Scottish executive and the Welsh assembly have been angered by the apparently 'unstoppable' granting of 18 GM commercial planting licence applications from companies including Bayer and Monsanto. But as Environment Secretary Margaret Beckett was quick to point out, Britain has no choice but to process such applications as are passed by the EC.

Some Scots were angry enough about a farm-scale trial on their doorstep to take direct action on 12th May to prevent cross-contamination between flowering GM oilseed rape and an adjacent commercial crop.

In a press statement, protestors pointed out that:

*"In the field next door to this experimental crop, ordinary commercial oilseed rape is growing, which will be sold as normal and find its way into the human food chain. This is reckless disregard of public health and environmental health."*⁷

In support of this contention, the National Institute for Agricultural Botany at Cambridge says that the current separation zone of 50 metres between GM crops and normal crops is not acceptable.⁸ Their research shows that cross-pollination occurs over much larger distances. In one experiment, 48% of wild turnips growing as weeds among a crop of GM oilseed rape had swapped genes with cultivated relatives, making them resistant to weedkiller.

NATIONAL TRUST GM BAN

Meanwhile, one of Britain's biggest landowners, The National Trust, is to ban GM crops on its 2,000 tenanted farms.

According to The Times, "The decision will be a serious blow to the GM lobby."⁹

Prince Charles, National Trust president and champion of all things organic, has never made a secret of his distaste for technologies that interfere with nature.

Lord Sainsbury, on the other hand, can barely contain his enthusiasm for

biotechnology. As a major benefactor of the Labour party and serving Science Minister, he is in an unusual – some would say indefensible - position.

*"Lord Sainsbury is a firm supporter of biotech foods, with many commercial links to the GM world... [he] has acted with complete propriety in his change of jobs, divesting himself of his directorships and putting his holdings into a blind trust. But you have to ask whether his salience as a donor to the Labour party affects the long-awaited decisions on GM foods that the Labour government must take. You have to wonder if Tony Blair can afford to run the risk of offending a man who writes such big cheques."*¹⁰

FSA CRITICISED

The Food Standards Agency came in for strong criticism from the Consumers' Association, the National Consumer Council, and Sustain, the alliance for better food and farming.

Accusing the FSA of prejudicing the government's public debate, they wrote to the FSA chairman, Sir John Krebs, criticising the FSA web site for claiming to offer impartial information but only offering "one side of the argument", and failing "to address the potential risks and consumer concerns about the long-term health impact of genetic modification".

PUBLIC DEBATE EXTENDED

The much-heralded 'public debate' has now been extended by three months with an increased £500,000 budget. This has, however, failed to dispel widespread fears that government ministers have already made the decision to introduce GM crops into Britain's countryside within the next 12 months, and rumours persist of a campaign of manipulation designed to railroad Britons into accepting GM products.

*"Backed by predatory intellectual property laws, agribusinesses are on their way to getting the global food supply so hopelessly cross pollinated, polluted and generally mixed up, that legislators may well be forced to throw up their hands."*¹¹

*"The decision has been taken to accept GM following tremendous pressure from the Americans. The Government is just going through the motions."*¹²

At least one third of the 25 experts involved in the government's GM review process are known to hold strong pro-GM views. These include consultants to Lord Sainsbury's biotech investment company Diatech Ltd, employees of Monsanto and Syngenta, and some who have attacked organic food as 'poisonous'.

*"In its headlong rush to complete the deliberations on the commercial growing of GM crops, the government has achieved an unenviable trinity - a prime minister who appears to have already made up his mind in favour of commercialisation; a government-sponsored debate which will be brought to conclusion before evidence from its own farm-scale trial evaluations are published; and a food standards agency that provides a citizen's jury appearing in favour of GM foods."*¹³

A growing suspicion that the much maligned and widely attacked farm scale trials are little more than window dressing was given more credence by Professor David King, the government's chief scientific adviser and chair of the GM review committee. He characterised the farm trials as a minor, barely significant element in global GM research.

"It would be absurd if we focused on one trial in the UK, on one aspect," he said. "Herbicide tolerance: that's all we are testing. I don't think many countries know about our little experiments."

Such comments will do little to dispel suggestions from some quarters that the real purpose of the farm scale trials was to draw the energy and attention of protestors into actions that would criminalise and therefore marginalise them in the minds of Middle England.

Yet the British public show no signs of being persuaded of the benefits of GM food.

According to research by the MORI Social Research Institute published in April, more than half the public (56%) opposes GM food, compared to one in seven (14%) who support it.^[14]

MAB - THE NEW HOPE

A new acronym is about to enter the language: MAB - Marker Assisted Breeding - is the latest thing in biotech and, ironically, may offer a peaceful resolution to the GM debacle.

*Molecular markers, like signposts and road maps, aid plant breeders to incorporate new genes and gene combinations into crops. By linking to the gene in question, a trait can be visualised in molecular terms long before it is expressed in the crop. This can potentially speed up the programme of traditional plant breeding and increase the efficiency by which the process is done.*¹⁵

MAB – also referred to as genomics - enhances and accelerates natural plant breeding by enabling operators to more readily identify desirable traits and breed from them, without bypassing the protective sexual reproduction process. It does not involve the cross-species transfer of genes (transgenics), and thus avoids the health and environmental risks inherent in genetic engineering plant breeding.

Newcastle University's Centre for Organic Agriculture says:

*"There is great potential for this technology in agriculture both in the advanced and developing world, and provides an alternative to transgenics as a means of rapid crop development."*¹⁶

Significantly, MAB is given a cautious welcome by the Soil Association:

*The Soil Association would welcome publicly owned research using MAB, provided the technology is not used to promote a narrowing of genetic diversity in plant varieties.*¹⁷

They go on to warn about the dangers of patent protectionism, making the point that, unless properly regulated, this technology could still be abused, *"...restricting access to scientific knowledge of naturally occurring biological phenomena by others for the benefit of the wider community."*

Marcus Williamson, editor of the NLP Wessex GM news service, also commented optimistically on this new technology in an interview on BBC Radio 4's Food Programme earlier this year:

"I actually believe that we're going to move on to a more sophisticated, more

appropriate, more integrated form of genetics, based on applying gene mapping to conventional plant breeding, which clearly eminent voices in the biotechnology industry consider have great potential, including... the head of plant breeding at Monsanto. So I regard [GM] as an interim technology, I think it's going to become yesterday's technology, and if we have a good debate we have a reasonable chance of finding the best solutions to creating a viable and sustainable agriculture in the future."¹⁸

MAB may indeed be the great new hope in biotechnology, but in the light of the experience of the last few years, it would be naive to think that the biotechs will transform themselves overnight from corporate wolves into benign and benevolent 'gentle giants'. As the medical journal *The Lancet* put it:

*"All policymakers must be vigilant to the possibility of research data being manipulated by corporate bodies and of scientific colleagues being seduced by the material charms of industry. Trust is no defence against an aggressively deceptive corporate sector."*¹⁹

The wolf behaves like a wolf because it knows no other way. Corporations behave as they do because we - through our legislature - have defined their nature: universally, corporate law requires that they maximise profits for the benefit of their owners, the shareholders.

If we want corporations to behave in a way that is in closer alignment with the needs and desires of the world at large; if we want them to have ethical standards and take account of issues beyond their primary directive, then we should consider measures to alter their nature by redefining their purpose, away from the creation of profit by any means and towards the promotion of public good, by delivering genuine, worthwhile social and environmental benefits.

To expect them to change their nature of their own accord is like expecting the wolf spontaneously to lie down with the lamb.

It is not going to happen.

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Footnotes

¹ <http://www.thisisnorthscotland.co.uk>

² Senator Chuck Grassley (R-Ia), chairman of the Committee on Finance, held a meeting with top officials from the White House, the Department of State, the Office of the U.S. Trade Representative, and the Department of Commerce to discuss the need to move forward with a case at the World Trade Organization against the European Union's biotech moratorium. Grassley requested the meeting after sending a strongly worded April 28 letter to U.S. Trade Representative Robert Zoellick, expressing frustration with the lack of a WTO case against the E.U.'s agricultural biotechnology product moratorium. In his letter, Grassley said the end of the war with Iraq removes one of the Administration's stated reasons for

delaying a case.

³ "...the GM companies have rediscovered the old way of dealing with reluctant customers: if persuasion doesn't work, use force." George Monbiot Tuesday August 21, 2001

⁴ ActionAid Report, *GM crops: going against the grain*, May 2003

⁵ Norman Baker, Lib Dem environment spokesman

⁶ Tim Price of NFU Mutual in a letter to Marcus Williamson, May 13 2003

⁷ The Guardian, Wednesday February 12, 2003

⁸ The Guardian, Monday December 30, 2002

⁹ Jonathan Leake, Science Editor, London Times, May 11, 2003

¹⁰ Leader, The Guardian, Wednesday April 2, 2003

¹¹ Naomi Klein, The Guardian, Thursday June 21, 2001

¹² Jason Nisse, The Independent on Sunday, Business section, 4 May 03

¹³ Andrew George, Lib Dem shadow food and rural affairs secretary

¹⁴ <http://www.mori.com/polls/2003/meb2.shtml>

¹⁵ <http://www.ncl.ac.uk/tcoa/projects/plantbreedorg.htm>

¹⁶ Tesco Centre for Organic Agriculture, University of Newcastle Upon Tyne

¹⁷ http://www.biotech-info.net/marker_assisted_breeding.html

¹⁸ www.btinternet.com/~nlpwessex

¹⁹ The Lancet, April 2000