



Researchers with vested interests lobbying to undermine GMO safety rules

28.09.2022

The EU's green ambitions are in great jeopardy. The agribusiness industry is using the cost-of-living crisis as an excuse to push stronger EU environmental legislation off the table and weaken already existing legislation. For instance, they are pushing against tighter pesticides rules and in favour of relaxing GMO rules. But the lobby is increasingly

Why do we use cookies on this website?

Cookies and similar technologies on our website are used to recognize your repeat visits and preferences, and help us assess the success of our outreach. By clicking "I Accept" or using our site, you consent to the use of cookies. Click "No, thanks" if you don't want to accept cookies from our site. [Our privacy policy](#)

OK, I agree

No, thanks

What is the problem with deregulation of new GMOs?

Companies are arguing for the EU to abolish key safety standards for many new GMOs. This would mean that plants, animals and micro-organisms, made using new 'genome editing' techniques like CRISPR-Cas, would not be subject to safety checks, traceability, or consumer labelling. Weaker or no rules for these new GMOs would go against a 2018 landmark ruling by the European Court of Justice which confirmed that such gene-edited organisms must be regulated under the EU's GMO regulations, and that deregulation would undermine the precautionary principle.

Corporate Europe Observatory has documented the concerted lobby effort by the seed industry and certain industry-linked research institutes. Our 2021 report ['Derailing EU rules on new GMOs'](#) shows how GM researchers and their institutes have taken an increasingly visible role in the lobby campaign.

EU-SAGE for instance was set up by the Flemish Biotechnology Institute, that has close ties with Bayer and BASF, specifically for the purpose of lobbying for deregulation. The European Plant Science Organisation (EPSO) has close collaboration with the industry as well. Both nevertheless portray themselves to decision makers as representing 'neutral' science.

Corporations like Bayer, Corteva, Syngenta, and BASF, with their high stakes in the pesticide business, are seen as less credible. A new report ['Food Barons'](#) by the organisation ETC Group shows that Bayer and Syngenta alone own a combined 40 per cent of the global commercial seed market. They would greatly benefit from deregulation of genome edited crops.

So these companies are turning to 'third party' researchers and institutes for credibility.

Why do we use cookies on this website?

Cookies and similar technologies on our website are used to recognize your repeat visits and preferences, and help us assess the success of our outreach. By clicking "I Accept" or using our site, you consent to the use of cookies. Click "No, thanks" if you don't want to accept cookies from our site. [Our privacy policy](#)

OK, I agree

No, thanks

Time for a catch up on these organisations' latest lobby activities.

Looking for stories to persuade consumers

The biotech lobby has realised that the public still has little appetite for GM food and is looking for new narratives to get around that. Perhaps if they are convinced that these crops are now somehow 'sustainable', consumers won't insist anymore on knowing whether or not their food contains GM crops?

For instance, EU-SAGE is inviting decision-makers from EU governments and the European Commission to a high-profile conference in October 2022 to discuss ways to counter the “impact of narratives in public opposition to agricultural innovation” (ie new GM technology). Here they will discuss how gene editing will provide “solutions in the transition to more sustainable agriculture” and will therefore serve the Farm to Fork and European Green Deal goals.

The conference agenda is dominated (six out of eight) by speakers of EU-SAGE and a Czech member of the organisation ALLEA – both investigated in the Greens Smokescreen report. The programme even features the logo of the Czech Presidency to the EU.

EPSO – the third organisation investigated – stepped up its meetings with like-minded officials in order to create support for deregulation in EU governments. They focus on having consumer surveys to demonstrate to politicians the public would accept new GM technology, for instance if promised they would use “fewer inputs” such as harmful pesticides. For example a Norwegian consumer survey seemed to suggest that consumers would support applications that would benefit society. But the surveys overstated the expected benefits, according to a critique published by the Norwegian Centre for Biosafety GenØk, while ignoring the risks.

Of course, surveys can be designed to deliver certain outcomes. But will they make people believe that corporations like Bayer and Syngenta are bringing solutions rather than problems?

Why do we use cookies on this website?

Cookies and similar technologies on our website are used to recognize your repeat visits and preferences, and help us assess the success of our outreach. By clicking "I Accept" or using our site, you consent to the use of cookies. Click "No, thanks" if you don't want to accept cookies from our site. [Our privacy policy](#)

OK, I agree

No, thanks

Previous work by a Gates-funded taskforce, that EU-SAGE is part of, shows that the narratives presented by those in favour of using genome editing are abstract and less powerful than those in favour of a more precautionary approach.

For instance, the GM developers claim these GM crops will deliver more sustainable farming requiring less pesticides and fertiliser. In Bayer's words * : "greater yields with fewer inputs will not be achievable without innovations such as genome editing".

But there is a lack of convincing evidence about how new GM crops will contribute to the fight against climate change and biodiversity crisis.

Moreover, corporations like Bayer and Syngenta lack credibility, since their business model is reliant on industrial farming with ever more chemicals. Bayer has not committed to reducing pesticide use, nor to dropping its most controversial products such as weedkiller glyphosate and bee-killer imidacloprid. So long as that hasn't happened it is hard to see how the story of producing crops that need "fewer inputs" can catch on. In the words of the communication experts – the narrative is insufficiently coherent.

Commission collusion

Yet the European Commission is taking their unverifiable claims for granted. They encouraged EU-SAGE * to use "new and effective forms of communication", according to speaking points prepared for a meeting. And the Commission is already using the industry narrative * , saying that the use of new GMOs "is a means to support the shift to a more sustainable agricultural production". They add that "communication is key" to make deregulation acceptable, and that "industry has a key role to play in communicating" that these technologies "bring benefits for the society".

Nevertheless, the Commission did express some caution * against unrealistic promises as well: "It is important not to promise more than what the technology can deliver." They added that linking new GM techniques to food security is not helpful: "This was done with GMOs in the past and ultimately the promises made were counterproductive."

Why do we use cookies on this website?

Cookies and similar technologies on our website are used to recognize your repeat visits and preferences, and help us assess the success of our outreach. By clicking "I Accept" or using our site, you consent to the use of cookies. Click "No, thanks" if you don't want to accept cookies from our site. [Our privacy policy](#)

OK, I agree

No, thanks

whereas the Commission does not think this is realistic. The reason may be that if the legislation is not finished before the 2024 election, it may get stranded.

Another reason may be that the industry simply cannot keep its promises of GM crops that support “sustainability”. Despite the fine words, so far, none of the three commercial seeds produced by gene editing do anything to reduce pesticides or fertilisers. They were launched in the US, Canada, and Japan where there aren’t any cumbersome regulations in place that would limit their success. EU-SAGE nor any of the other ‘researcher’ lobby platforms can credibly show that corporations they team up with really intend to move away from destructive, chemical-heavy farming.

Therefore it remains highly doubtful that the public will be convinced. More than 300,000 citizens have [signed an EU-wide petition](#) demanding rules for mandatory safety checks, transparency, and labelling for all GMOs are upheld.

Help us stay independent

We are a small team that works fully independently of funding from EU institutions and corporations.

Every single donation helps us fight the hold of Big Business over the EU.

[Donate](#)

Why do we use cookies on this website?

Cookies and similar technologies on our website are used to recognize your repeat visits and preferences, and help us assess the success of our outreach. By clicking "I Accept" or using our site, you consent to the use of cookies. Click "No, thanks" if you don't want to accept cookies from our site. [Our privacy policy](#)

OK, I agree

No, thanks