

Press Notice 20.3.2005

EC accused of "ongoing conspiracy" to suppress research on GM health hazards

The EC has been accused today by community groups across Europe of an ongoing conspiracy to keep sensitive information on GM safety studies out of the public domain. It has also been accused of "playing politics with public health" by turning a blind eye on inconvenient scientific findings and approving potentially dangerous GM varieties simply to please the Americans and the WTO.

GM Free Cymru, a watchdog group based in West Wales, has been trying without success to obtain sight of a secret dossier relating to Monsanto's MON863 maize variety, which is one of a family of GM crops already listed for use in Europe. The dossier contains the full application submitted by Monsanto for EC approval, details of a 90-day rat feeding study commissioned by the seed owners, a critique of that study commissioned from Dr Arpad Pusztai by the German Environment Ministry, and other material sent to the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA) by its own GMO Scientific Panel. None of this material has been released for public perusal, in spite of many requests from Greenpeace, GeneWatch, GM Watch, Friends of the Earth and other organizations.

According to GM Free Cymru this conspiracy extends back at least five years. Members claim that the holding of "secret dossiers" acts against the public interest, and that it is also unlawful.

With respect to MON863, there are now strong indications that the rat feeding study completed five years ago (and still not peer reviewed or released to the public) has thrown up physiological changes which show the crop to be unsuitable for either animal or human consumption (1).

Doubts have been thrown on the integrity of Monsanto's commissioned research results by a French study published last year (5), by a Belgian review of the evidence, and finally by the refusal of other EU nations to accept releases of MON863 into the food chain. Now it has emerged that Dr Pusztai's September 2004 review of the rat feeding study was only allowed by Monsanto on condition that it would not be published or released to the public. Furthermore, Dr Pusztai himself was required to sign a "confidentiality agreement" which means that he can not even talk about the study. The creation of what is in effect a "secret dossier" by Monsanto and the EC contravenes EU law (2), and NGOs are furious about the "gagging" of a respected independent scientist.

This is not all. Monsanto is seeking approvals for MON863 in Australia and New Zealand as well, and although it has signed a declaration to the effect that it will not withhold any information that might prejudice its application, it now appears that the company has broken the law and failed to submit the full report on the study showing abnormalities in rats fed on MON863 (3). Further, the evidence that it HAS submitted is highly selective and misleading.

"This situation is totally unacceptable, and shows that the whole GM approvals process is corrupt (8)," said Dr Brian John of GM Free Cymru. "Critical health and safety information is being kept out of the public domain simply because Monsanto, a gigantic biotechnology corporation, insists on its right to "commercial confidentiality." This is patently absurd, since only a very small part of its dossier (for example relating to DNA sequences) is commercially

sensitive. Such secrecy would not be permitted in the USA (7). We cannot understand why the EC does business with Monsanto anyway, given its long track record of deception, bullying and corruption (4). Is the EC in charge of the GM approval process, or is Monsanto? If the EC does not release the full MON863 dossier into the public domain, and allow Dr Pusztai to speak freely about what he has discovered, we believe that Wales -- and every other part of Europe -- should simply invoke the precautionary principle and ban all 17 of the named GM varieties which are already approved by the EC. We are convinced that most if not all of those varieties are dangerous (9). If nothing else, such a ban would be lawful, and entirely in tune with the wishes of the general public."

ENDS

Contact:

Dr Brian John
GM Free Cymru
Tel: + 44 1239 820 470

NOTES

(1) Open letter from Ian Panton of GM Free Cymru to Geoffrey Podger of EFSA, 14 March 2005.

<http://www.gmwatch.org/archive2.asp?arcid=4986>

Pusztai "gagged" on GM maize that caused rat abnormalities

(2) MONSANTO DEFIES GERMAN GOVERNMENT ON RISK STUDY

Monsanto has refused a request by the German government to hand over a study showing that rats fed a variety of Monsanto GM maize suffered serious health abnormalities, Greenpeace revealed. The German government, who assessed Monsanto's original application for approval of the MON863 maize, officially asked the company to present the full study to them, after Le Monde disclosed its details last month. But Monsanto has refused to hand over the document, claiming it is "confidential business information". This contravenes EU law, which stipulates that any information concerning human health or environmental safety must be made public. The study, carried out by Monsanto, found that rats fed with MON863 suffered a number of abnormal effects in the development of blood cells and vital organs, including the kidneys. Despite being aware of these results, the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA) delivered a positive assessment on the maize on 19 April 2004.

GM Watch Archive: <http://www.gmwatch.org/archive2.asp?arcid=3589>

(3) <http://www.scoop.co.nz/mason/stories/PA0409/S00303.htm>

(4) "Monsanto's World Wide Web of deceit"

<http://www.gmwatch.org/p1temp.asp?pid=25&page=1>

(5) In April 2004, Le Monde reported the CGB's view on MON863 and the existence of the Monsanto rat feeding report. When Greenpeace asked the German regulatory authority for sight of it, Monsanto refused to release the government body from the confidentiality agreement it had signed. While European regulators may have seen the Monsanto study, it has never, to our knowledge, been publicly released.

<http://www.scoop.co.nz/stories/PA0409/S00046.htm>

See also http://www.crii-gen.org/m_fs_axbis.htm

(6) The EC still appears to be obsessed with maintaining its secrecy on sensitive GM information. In a recent EU Environment Council discussion, it became clear that the EC wishes to maintain a special "protected position" for the GMO approval process. At the meeting it agreed with the member states that GMOs should be given privileged protection against public scrutiny. This goes against the wishes of almost all of the NGOs dealing with GM issues, and against the spirit of both the Aarhus Convention and the Cartagena Protocol. GMO, AARHUS AND THE EUROPEAN UNION (14th March 2005)

(7) The "secret dossiers" of GM information would not be permitted in the United States. "The kinds of studies you discuss would be available to the public here. MON863 was indeed evaluated by our EPA. In fact the safety data submitted to the authorities (human health and environment), are routinely made available to the public, as well as any comments to the agency on the application. There appears to be no good reason why your EFSA should not also release ALL of the information on its MON863 file." (Dr Doug Gurian-Sherman, Senior Scientist, Center of Food Safety, in correspondence with Ian Panton of GM Free Cymru.)

(8) There is a long and dishonourable tradition of keeping sensitive GM information out of the public domain across the EU. For example, in the UK there was fury when Aventis (now Bayer CropScience) refused to cooperate in the Chardon LL hearing, and refused to place its own safety studies on the record. The same company has consistently refused to release the findings of a cattle feeding study based at Reading University, using Chardon LL (T25) fodder maize. Monsanto has also refused to release the full safety research dossiers relating to other varieties such as MON810 and associated hybrids.

(9) Many of these "listed varieties" are multiple GM hybrids which combine the traits from several GM lines. Without undertaking any research on the matter, EFSA has blithely accepted that they are all safe, in spite of warnings from independent scientists that they may well be inherently unstable.