

Behind the smokescreen

Vested interests of EU scientists lobbying for GMO deregulation

Written by Claire Robinson, MPhil

Co-director, GMWatch

Research by Anne-Charlotte Moy

Editing by Franziska Achterberg

Summary

In 2018 the European Court of Justice (ECJ) ruled that new gene-edited organisms are covered by the EU's GMO laws and are subject to the same safety assessments and labelling requirements as any other GMOs. The ruling galvanized a concerted lobbying response by promoters of new GM technology – for example, the biotechnology industry lobby group EuropaBio and the EU's seed industry association Euroseeds – to get these new GMOs exempted from the EU's GMO laws.

The lobbying effort appeared to pay off when in April 2021, the European Commission stated that it would “initiate a policy action” to exclude certain genetically modified (GM) crops from the EU's GMO legislation. The Commission said that the current GMO legislation is “not fit for purpose” for plants produced with certain “innovative technologies” and “needs adaptation to scientific and technological progress”.

The Commission's announcement echoed earlier statements by the EU seed industry association Euroseeds, which represents agribusiness multinationals like Bayer, BASF and Corteva. Euroseeds cheered the announcement and warned that the Commission – and EU Member States – must act quickly.

Two organisations – the European Plant Science Organisation (EPSO) and the EU network for Sustainable Agriculture through Genome Editing (EU-SAGE) – also hailed the Commission's announcement, using almost the same words. Indeed, these organisations had lobbied intensively for legislative change from the time of the ECJ ruling.

What are these groups? Why would they promote a weakening of the EU's GMO legislation? And in what way do they represent “science”? This report answers this question by investigating three EU-level organisations – EPSO, EU-SAGE, and the European Federation of Academies of Sciences and Humanities (ALLEA). It looks at the interests and alliances of the most active individuals involved in these groups and the national organisations with which they are affiliated. It shows that overlaps in the positions of these scientist organisations and the seed industry association are not a coincidence, as members of both stand to benefit economically from a relaxation of the EU's GMO legislation, individually and/or via their institutions.

Findings include (figures for EPSO are from June 2022 and for EU-SAGE from May 2021):

- A large number of people actively involved in the three EU level organisations have strong links with the seed industry and hold patents or patent applications in this area.

- Sixty-four per cent of the members of the EPSO working group on Agricultural Technologies, which develops opinions in this field for EPSO as a whole, and 32% of EU-SAGE members have a vested interest in the commercialisation of GM plants, meaning they stand to benefit from it financially or in terms of career development, either personally or via their organisations. They are strong advocates for the deregulation of GM technologies without stating their economic interests in the context of these discussions.
- Thirty-eight per cent of EPSO Agricultural Technologies working group members and 23% of EU-SAGE network members hold one or more patents or patent applications related to GM processes or products. Fifty-three per cent of EPSO working group members and 15% of EU-SAGE members have been involved in one or more research projects with the industry. In a disturbing percentage of cases (22% for EPSO and 10% for EU-SAGE), individuals are involved in a seed or biotechnology company, by holding a position or shares in such companies.
- Ninety-eight per cent of EPSO working group members and 83% of EU-SAGE network members have a background in genetics and molecular biology. Expertise in areas relevant to assessing the potential negative consequences of using new GM techniques in agriculture, such as ecology, agroecology, socioeconomics, toxicology, and public health is not evident in these organisations.
- Certain public research institutions have strong links with one or more of the three lobby groups, as well as the agricultural biotechnology industry. For example, several employees of the VIB (Flemish Institute for Biotechnology) are highly active in the lobbying activities of all three groups. EU-SAGE is hosted at the VIB, as was EPSO in its early years. The lobby groups defend the same positions as the companies that the VIB works with in commercial ventures to “translate research findings into products”. Companies like Bayer Bioscience, Bayer Cropscience, and CropDesign are represented in the general assembly of the VIB – its “most senior body”.
- Other research institutions with strong links to both the three lobby groups and the agricultural biotechnology industry are INRAE, France; Luke Finland; Wageningen Plant Research, Netherlands; SLU Alnarp, Sweden; and CRAG, Spain. While these are public universities and research institutions, they are not simply the home of independent scientific thought, but are tightly enmeshed with commercial interests. This is also the result of government policies that have encouraged the institutions to seek funding from industry and income from the technology they develop. In this way, governments have turned research institutions into “cash cows”.

These findings mean that the lobby groups and individual researchers identified in this report cannot be said to advocate “science-based” policies, let alone to represent “science”. They represent a limited field of applied science with material interests in the commercial use of GM technology in agriculture.

Our analysis of individuals involved in EU level lobbying via the three groups shows that the largest group (51 out of a total of 247 in EPSO + EU-SAGE) is from Germany – home to two

of the world's largest seed companies, Bayer and BASF. Spain and Italy follow, with each 19 individuals.

Only information in the public domain was used in compiling this report (this includes information obtained via access-to-documents requests submitted by Corporate Europe Observatory, which they have subsequently made public), meaning that the results are conservative. In other words, the real level of vested interests may be far greater than is reported here. One reason is the confidential nature of some research agreements.

Having vested interests while participating in certain regulatory decisions may not be a problem in itself. However, a problem arises when these interests are not disclosed in contributions to the debate about GMO regulation and when the individuals present themselves as independent, disinterested scientists and the “voice of science”. Advocacy is an acceptable part of democracy, but presenting stakeholders as neutral scientists is not.

While all voices are welcome in the EU debate on the regulation of GM organisms, the specific situation of scientists and organisations involved in the development of GM technology and agricultural applications must be considered. Most crucially, their interests should always be disclosed in discussions on EU GMO regulation.

Arguably, none of the above would matter if the messages given out by the lobby groups were scientifically accurate and could be relied upon to inform a sound and precautionary regulation for new GM crops. However, existing scientific evidence summarised in Annex I to this report (online) shows that their claims – that gene editing is precise, controllable, produces only changes that could happen in nature, and safe for the consumer and the environment – are false or highly misleading. Therefore their promotion of these messages misleads regulators and jeopardises public health and the environment.

Based on the findings of this report, we recommend that policymakers, regulators, and the public view the claims and recommendations of these lobby groups critically and instead seek expert input from genuinely independent scientists with no vested interests in the commercialisation of GM technologies and products. This should include scientists who are actively researching the risks of these technologies and who have authored the papers quoted in Annex I to this report.