

# PRESS RELEASE

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## IRISH TIMES SLAMMED FOR BIAS ON GM ISSUES

### Irresponsible journalism stifles informed debate Conflict of interest with biotech lobby group

GM-free Ireland press release, 25 October 2007.

DUBLIN -- The Irish Times, regarded as the country's journal of record, systematically represents the interests of the biotech industry lobby group EAGLES [1], whose Co-ordinator Prof. David McConnell of TCD is also the Chairman of the Irish Times Trust which owns the paper.

In *Debating GM: An analysis of GM coverage in the Irish Times and the Irish Farmers Journal from March 2004 to February 2006*, a Dublin Institute of Technology thesis by journalism student Emma Somers made a quantitative analysis of the sources, and a qualitative analysis of GM coverage in these two papers.

The study revealed significant bias towards the biotech industry. Of the 48 articles published in the Irish Times, 65% quoted official sources, 13% quoted biotech industry sources, 10% quoted farming sources, and 6 % quoted biotech industry lobby groups. Only 21% quoted NGOs (which have the most expertise on the subject) and 10% quoted farming sources (which are most affect by GM policies). Most articles framed the issue as scientists versus Luddites.

#### Disinformation

Consider the short article "GM feed imports are inevitable" by Marie O'Halloran, in yesterday's edition [2]. The article has just three sentences.

The first sentence begins by creating the false impression that GM animal feed will be introduced at some time in the future. In reality most Irish meat, poultry and dairy produce has come from livestock fed on GM ingredients for the past 11 years. This sentence continues with a claim that the use of GM animal feed is "inevitable", despite the fact that certified non-GMO animal feed is both available and affordable [3].

The second sentence refers to a statement by Agriculture Minister Mary Coughlan that "new legislation" has been put in place in response to consumer concerns about GM food. No such new legislation exists. The EC's mandatory labelling law for food and feed containing GM ingredients came in to effect over three years ago, in 2004 [4]. The second sentence also signally fails to mention the loophole which enables meat and dairy produce from livestock fed on GM ingredients to be sold without a label, as well as the historic petition, signed by one million EU citizens and delivered to EU Health and Consumer Affairs Commissioner Markos Kyprianou on 5 February, which calls for mandatory labelling of such produce, based on the citizens right to know what's in our food [5].

The third sentence uncritically quotes the Minister for Agriculture's claim that this so-called "new legislation" embodies the "highest possible standards" to protect citizens. But nothing could be further from the truth:

- 65 different GM health risks have been identified in the book "Genetic Roulette: the documented health risks of genetically engineered food" [6] which was launched at the Briefing on Food Safety and GMOs held at the European Parliament Office in Dublin on 15 June, in the presence of Irish Times Trust chairman Prof. McConnell and a journalist from that paper. A leaked European Commission document submitted to the World Trade Organisation admits "there is no unique, absolute, scientific cut-off threshold available to decide whether a GM product is safe or not" [7]. No long-term health studies prove that GM food and feed are safe.

- The Food Safety Authority of Ireland (FSAI) does not conduct health risk assessments, but relies entirely on dubious claims made by the European Food Safety Authority [8], which are themselves based on data provided to it by the applicant biotech companies.

FSAI's position - that "GM feed and food are as safe as their conventional counterparts" - is not surprising in view of the conflict of interest resulting from the fact that FSAI CEO John O'Brien is a former boardmember of the International Life Sciences Institute [9], which is funded by biotech giants Monsanto, Bayer AG, Dow Chemical, DuPont, Syngenta and other companies. This biotech industry lobby group has been widely criticised for posing as a Non Governmental Organisation and infiltrating the World Health Organisation and the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) in order to lower international food safety standards [10].

- The European Food Safety Authority (EFSA) also does not conduct health risk assessments [11]. Although EFSA was set up in 2002, long after GM ingredients entered our food chain, its GMO Panel still refuses to conduct scientifically valid health risk assessments on GM food and feed. It has consistently dismissed the concerns of other scientists working for national Governments. It continues to rely on extremely questionable safety claims made by the applicant companies, thus showing that its much-vaunted "independence" is a smokescreen used by the biotech industry and the EC to force GM feed and food into the European market. The GMO Panel disregards statistically significant differences between GM and their non-GM counterparts, instead agreeing with the industry that the results of such tests are not biologically relevant or treatment related. In addition the Panel ignores EU requirements to identify the level of uncertainty in its assumptions, and fails to take in legal requirements that regard is given to the long term effects of eating or growing GM foods. Despite a call for EFSA reform in November 2004, which was repeated by Markos Kyprianou in 2005, EFSA has failed to do so. At a meeting of the EU Environment Ministers on 30 October, the Italian Environment Minister will call for EFSA to stop all further GMO approvals until it complies with the required reforms.

The fourth sentence states that Fine Gael has called for a "Green Ireland" label to brand Irish food, and quotes that party's new agriculture spokesperson, Michael Creed, complaining about "the abuse of labelling laws". This creates the false impression that Fine Gael came up with the Green Ireland concept, and that existing EC food labelling law is being abused, whereas it is the law itself which is abusive because it makes it perfectly legal for an Irish food producer to label a product such as bacon made in Ireland from pig meat imported from a foreign country like Brazil to be legally sold as "Irish". And if Michael Creed gets his way, he would himself abuse the Green Ireland label to pass off meat and dairy produce from livestock fed on GM ingredients (which now excluded by more and more EU retailers quality brands) as the best that Ireland can offer.

Fine Gael formally adopted the "Green Ireland" concept following the Green Ireland conference on branding for food, farming and eco-tourism organised by GM-free Ireland in June 2006 [12].

Speaking at that event, Brody Sweeney, the CEO of O'Brien's Sandwich Bars who subsequently ran as a Fine Gael candidate in the 2007 General Election, gave a presentation called "Project Green" in which he said *"There is no one country that said, 'We are the absolute top quality food producers for Europe. We are going to be the guys with the GMO-free environment, where we're going to have more organic, where our food is going to be traceable, where we are really going to care and believe in what we say about our food.' ...Nobody has done it yet. I think it's just a fantastic opportunity for Ireland to be that country"* [13]. Michael Creed obviously doesn't know that the concept of the Green Ireland brand, proposed by GM-free Ireland and introduced into Fine Gael policy by Brody Sweeney, requires such food to be GM-free.

Disinformation of this kind - perpetrated through biased, misleading, irresponsible reporting - and the conflict of interest between Prof. McConnell's dual roles as Chairman of the Irish Times Trust and Co-ordinator of the EAGLES biotech lobby group are not acceptable for the newspaper of record in Ireland's "knowledge-based economy".

This clearly violates the core object of the Trust's Memoranda and Articles of Association, "to publish an independent newspaper primarily concerned with serious issues for the benefit of the community throughout the whole of Ireland, free from any form of personal or of party political, commercial, religious or other sectional control."

[ENDS]

## Notes for editors:

1. The Chairman of the Irish Times Trust, Prof. David McConnell of Trinity College Dublin Smurfit School of Genetics, is the Co-ordinator and Co-Vice Chairman of EAGLES - European Action on Global Life Sciences (<http://www.efb-central.org/eagles>). EAGLES is an initiative of the European Federation of Biotechnology lobby group, designed to secure EU funding for European biotech companies to promote GM food and farming in the developing countries.

Ireland's newly appointed Chief Scientific Officer, Prof. Paddy Cunningham is also a member of EAGLES. He recently told delegates at the Agriculture Science Association National Conference that "Scientific evidence has overwhelmingly shown that food derived from GM crops or from animals fed on GM feed is safe" (Herculex to be approved by default shortly, Irish Farmers Journal, 22 September 2007)!

2. The full article reads as follows:

Ireland: GM feed imports are 'inevitable'

The Irish Times, 24 October 2007. By Marie O'Halloran.

It is practically inevitable that genetically modified (GM) crops are going to form a significant part of Irish feed material imports, the Dáil has been told.

Minister for Agriculture Mary Coughlan said concerns expressed by consumers about the safety of GM resulted in the introduction of new legislation.

"The new legislation, which is considered to be among the most stringent in the world, governs the assessment and approval procedures for GM crops, food, and feed and ensures that the highest possible standards are in place to protect citizens", she said.

Fine Gael spokesman Michael Creed criticised ambiguous food labelling and said "the abuse of labelling laws can hoodwink consumers who are actively trying to buy Irish produce. Fine Gael has called for a single, easily recognisable food label - Green Ireland - which would instantly brand Irish food.

3. Certified non-GMO feed is available for a small premium, (around € 0.01 (1 cent) per kg for soya meal and around 10 - 15% for GM-free maize gluten) above the cost of GM feed. Irish farmers who use GM-free feed are recouping the cost from premia offered by leading retailers in the UK, France, Italy, Switzerland and Germany which have either (a) already banned meat, poultry and dairy produce from livestock fed on GM ingredients from their supermarket shelves or (b) created their own quality brands which specifically exclude such contaminated produce. Ireland's leading beef exporter, Kepak, also requires non-GMO certification for its top-of-the-range K Club beef brand.

Concerned policy makers in the political parties, government agencies, food and farm sectors should participate in the following events:

Conference on Non-GM Feedstuff, Quality Production and European Agriculture Strategy  
Co-hosted by the EU Committee of the Regions and the European GMO-free Regions Network  
5 - 6 December 2007  
Committee of the Regions Office  
Brussels  
Registration: <http://www.gmofree-euregions.net>

World Summit on GMO-Free Diversity  
12-16 May 2008  
Bonn (Germany)  
Registration: <http://www.gmo-free-regions.org/planetdiversity.html>

For more info on animal feed see <http://www.gmfreeireland.org/feed/>

4. The EU Regulations on Genetically Modified Food and Feed (Regulation (EC) N 1829/2003) and Traceability/Labelling (Regulation (EC) N 1830/2003) were published in the Official Journal of the European Union on 18 October 2003, and entered into force on 18 April 2004.

5. One million citizens call for labelling of GM foods, EU Observer, 5 February 2007:  
<http://www.gmfreeireland.org/feed/EUpetition.php>

6. "Genetic Roulette: the documented health risks of genetically engineered food", by Jeffrey M. Smith, with an introduction by Michael Meacher, MP. Yes! Books; hardcover; 336 pages; € 23; on sale at the Cultivate Centre, 15-19 Essex St. West, Temple Bar, Dublin 8, tel (01) 674 5733. Also available by mailorder from  
<http://www.geneticroulette.com>.

Of the 65 health risks identified in the scientific studies covered in this book, the first 20 risks are adverse findings linked to GM products, including thousands of toxic and allergic-type reactions, thousands of sick, sterile and dead animals, and damage to virtually every organ and system studied in lab animals. The other 45 health risks are theoretical ones based on current scientific understanding.

7. See "Hidden uncertainties - What the European Commission doesn't want us to know about the risks of GMOs", briefing from Friends of the Earth Europe and Greenpeace, April 2006  
[http://www.foeeurope.org/publications/2006/hidden\\_uncertainties.pdf](http://www.foeeurope.org/publications/2006/hidden_uncertainties.pdf).

8. FSAI admitted this at a hearing of the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Environment and Local Government on 24 November 2004, when FSAI Chief Biotechnology Specialist Dr. Pat O'Mahony said "We are a law enforcement agency so we do not carry out research", and FSAI Director of Food Science and Standards and Deputy CEO, Alan Reilly, admitted "We rely on scientific opinion from the European Food Safety Authority." For full transcript, see Irish Parliamentary Debate, Vol. No. 38, Scrutiny of EU Proposals, Wednesday, 24 November 2004  
<http://www.gmfreeireland.org/downloads/GMO-24november2004.pdf>

See also "First live GMO animal feed legalised in the EU", GM-free Ireland press release, 2 September 2005.  
<http://www.gmfreeireland.org/press/GMFI21.pdf>.

9. The International Life Sciences Institute (<http://www.ilsilife.org>) is a Washington-D.C. based lobby group funded by food, chemical and drug companies including biotech giants Monsanto, Bayer AG, Dow Chemical, DuPont, and Novartis (now Syngenta). It acts primarily it acts on behalf of the global food manufacturing industry, but also includes operations involved with agriculture and genetic modification; pesticides and pharmaceuticals; confectionary; and tobacco. According to its own material, the public agenda of the ILSI "is directed towards its concern for public health issues, such as human nutrition, questions of food ingredient and additive safety, the provision of clean water and air, research into food-related allergies, and general problems of chemical and environmental safety." However, its private agenda has often been designed to thwart attempts to regulate or reduce public exposure to many dangerous or environmentally-damaging substances. Its private interests are focussed on the financial benefits of its major backers the larger food companies and their trade associations. This imbalance led, eventually, to the World Health Organization banning the organisation from direct involvement in WHO (and related agencies) activities (see note 9 below).

10. "WHO 'infiltrated by food industry", The Guardian, 9 January 2003:  
[http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk\\_news/story/0,3604,871228,00.html](http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk_news/story/0,3604,871228,00.html)

The World Health Organisation executive board ruled in January 2006 that ILSI "can no longer take part in WHO activities setting microbiological or chemical standards for food and water, following formal complaints from the Natural Resources Defense Council, Environmental Working Group, United Steelworkers of America and a coalition of other groups. The WTO ruling demoted ILSI's status from participating NGO down to that of a mere observer at WHO meetings.

11. "The EFSA stakeholders challenge - working with civil society", briefing paper by Friends of the Earth Europe, EPHA, Euro Coop, EEB and Greenpeace:  
[http://www.foeeurope.org/publications/2005/EFSA\\_stakeholders\\_challenge.pdf](http://www.foeeurope.org/publications/2005/EFSA_stakeholders_challenge.pdf)

See also "Throwing Caution to the Wind: A review of the European Food Safety Authority and its work on genetically modified foods and crops", briefing paper by Friends of the Earth Europe, November 2004:  
<http://www.foeeurope.org/GMOs/publications/EFSAreport.pdf>

12. Proceedings of the Green Ireland Conference:  
<http://www.gmfreeireland.org/conference/>

13. Speech by Brody Sweeney: <http://www.gmfreeireland.org/conference/trans/bsweeney.php>

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