

PROCEEDINGS OF THE GREEN IRELAND CONFERENCE

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CLARE OXBORROW • Speech

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www.gmfreeireland.org/conference/trans/C.Oxborrow.pdf



Clare Oxorrow is a GM campaigner with Friends of the Earth Europe (FOEE).

Friends of the Earth Europe campaigns for sustainable and just societies and for the protection of the environment, uniting more than 30 national organisations with thousands of local groups and is part of the world's largest grassroots environmental network, Friends of the Earth International.

Friends of the Earth International, the world's largest grassroots environmental network, unites 73 national member organisations and some 5,000 local activist groups on every continent.

Friends of the Earth has a Biotechnology Programme and a European GMO Campaign, which works to secure strict EU legislation on GMO releases, traceability and labelling of GM food, legal liability for GM producers and the right for people to say NO to GMOs.

This is the complete transcript of a video recording of Clare's speech, slightly edited for clarity.

Footnote references may be found on pages 6 - 7.

You can also download Clare's PowerPoint Presentation which accompanied this speech: [GMO-free Regions: opposition to GM crops in Europe from the GM-free Ireland web site at www.gmfreeireland.org/conference/PPT/GMO-freeEurope.ppt](http://www.gmfreeireland.org/conference/PPT/GMO-freeEurope.ppt) (large 9.4 MB ppt file).

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Thank you very much. Hearing the stories from Percy [Schmeiser] and Vandana [Shiva], you would wonder why anyone would want to promote GM technology as a way forward in Europe. Unfortunately there forces at work, the same corporations at work here in Europe who are determined to get their technology world-wide. But as you know, the resistance in Europe has been incredible, so I want to bring things a little closer to home now and talk about the campaigns and where we're at politically with GMOs in Europe.

Just picking up from something the previous speakers were talking about, it's really important to bear in mind that GM crops have failed world-wide. Vandana mentioned the four crops [GMO soya beans, maize, cotton and oilseedrape] and the four main countries [USA, Canada, Argentina and Brazil] where they are being grown.

Something that wasn't mentioned that I just want to touch on, something to bear in mind for the rest of the conference, is that these four crops are not going primarily into human food. They are going to feed animals, in an intensive animal farming system in the West. So it's a vicious cycle of monoculture GM crops feeding and fuelling an increasingly intensive animal farming system in the West. And an important thing for this conference to think about is how we break that cycle.

Going to Europe, I want to touch first on what the reality is in terms of GM crop growing. Commercially there is still very little being grown. In the EU, Spain is the only country that is growing any significant amount of GM crops, which is Bt maize [1]. There are now widespread reports of problems with contamination of organic and conventional crops, which the Spanish government is unfortunately ignoring. There is a recent report from Greenpeace which documents this in detail [2].

There is very little Bt maize, Monsanto's 810 maize, now being grown in Portugal, Czech Republic, Germany and France – but it is really very small amounts and around those commercial plantings many activists are mobilizing and pulling up crops as we speak.

We've had no new GM crops approved for cultivation since 1998 in the EU. But there are twelve applications in the pipe-line for commercial cultivation that the companies are trying to get approval for: ten are maize, and most of these are both Bt insect-resistant and herbicide-tolerant in the same crop; there is one soya, and one potato which is for industrial uses.

Now thinking a little bit about the politics of the game, back in 1998 we started a European de facto moratorium on new GM crop approvals. This was enforced by the Member State countries which were concerned about GMOs, concerned about the speed with which the companies were trying to introduce the technology, and they decided that they would block any new approvals of GMOs in Europe. That started in 1998.

As we heard now from Vandana, over the years the biotech companies have got increasingly frustrated with this European position on GMOs because they are losing millions and millions of dollars a year. And in 2003 we had this WTO dispute [3] when the companies resorted to pressure on the US government to launch this WTO dispute to try and force GM foods into Europe. The estimates were around 300 million dollars being lost a year in maize exports as a result.

This obviously had an impact on the European Commission, which unfortunately has become increasingly pro-GM over the past few years.

I don't know how familiar everyone is with the way the decisions are made in Europe. Very briefly, there are three bodies involved: the European Commission, unelected representatives of the executive arm of Europe; the European Parliament, whose MEPs at the moment have no say in the decisions that are being taken on GM; and the Council of Ministers which consists of the Agriculture and Environment Ministers from Member States across Europe.

So in terms of GM decision-making at the moment, the players are the Commission – unelected people like the Agriculture Commissioner, the Environment Commissioner; and the Member State Ministers.

The Commission is becoming increasingly pro-GM – partially as a result of the pressure from this trade dispute. And since 2004, the Commission has approved seven new GM foods and feeds for import into Europe [during the Irish Presidency of the EU] [4]. It is the Commission which is actually taking these decisions.

The Agriculture Ministers, and the Member State [Environment] Ministers have failed to agree on the safety of these new foods and feeds. And the ridiculous way the decision-making system works in Europe is that if the Member States can't agree – even though the majority of countries are opposed to these applications – if they don't reach the so-called "qualified majority" which is about two thirds of the votes in one way or the other, the Commission then gets to take the unilateral decision. And because the Commission is increasingly pro-GM and in bed with the biotech companies, every single time it has come to take one of these decisions, it has approved the GMO.

Then back in March 2005, we got a new European Commission, and they were pretty strong in their pro-GM policy. They laid it out that they wanted to push new GM foods through, they wanted to approve new GM crops despite there being no laws at all to try and prevent contamination and sort out the issue of liability. And they wanted to get a number of national bans lifted, which were held by Member States.

These national bans were held in Austria, Luxembourg, France, Greece and Germany, and they formed part of the [grounds for] the WTO dispute. They were on particular GM crops and foods that already had approval. The Commission brought the case to the Environment Ministers back in June last year, and the Commission was proposing that those countries should lift their national bans. But for the first time in the history of GM decision-making, the Member States actually reached a "qualified majority", which meant that every single Member State bar two (the UK being one of them, unfortunately), voted against the Commission proposal [5] – which means these national bans are still in place, which is great.

It's interesting to look at the biotech industry strategy in all of this. Where is Monsanto, where are all these big players? They've learnt their lessons from the past few years. You don't see them out talking about GM and how it's going to feed the world anymore. They've disappeared, they've retreated behind front groups, behind industry lobbyists; they've been doing their lobbying behind closed doors, and they are pushing the Commission on this supposed "competitiveness" agenda, which is their new big thing: "Green biotech – Europe is going to be competitive in this, we need to go forward" – that is where the industry is at, at the moment.

But if you look at it, GM crops are not the answer to job creation and competitiveness, as we have heard in the wake of where GM crops have been grown so far. We've had exports of maize from the US and exports of oilseed rape from Canada reduced to virtually zero into the EU since they introduced GMOs. And countries are actually seeing a trade benefit in keeping their export commodities non-GM. And the supposed high cost of GM avoidance policy which the US bangs on about is a total myth. There are very very few jobs in "green" agricultural biotech in Europe.

In fact on the other side, organic agriculture is showing much more positive results in terms of economic growth, increased yields, using less resources, virtually no pesticides, and obvious associated environmental impact benefits. Other sustainable agriculture methods as well are showing much more improvement in this respect.

If you look at sustainable farming in the EU, the top box there [slide x in the PowerPoint presentation] is conventional farming, the bottom is organic. The different colours represent various non-agricultural activities bringing in money to farms across the EU. And you can see that this is huge for organic, almost three times the conventional, and that is from tourism,

processing, aquaculture, renewable resources, handicrafts and other things. So there is a lot more diversity in organic and sustainable farming in the EU.

To get back to the WTO dispute, as Vandana said, the WTO was completely the wrong place to be deciding this kind of trade dispute. It was really a desperate measure by the companies to try to force a product on an unwilling market in Europe. But it's really useful to look at the detail of what came out of it. Because despite the propaganda by the US, the US did not win the dispute!

The Final Report has now been sent to the Parties, in secret. It won't be made public until later this year. But Friends of the Earth actually got a leaked copy of the Interim Report back in February [6] which showed that the US did mislead the world over this supposed victory. Crucially, the ruling does not challenge our European GM legislation. It doesn't challenge the rights of the countries to put in place strong bio-safety laws. And even moratoria and bans were not found illegal, per se, under WTO rules.

But they did find that the national bans here in Europe were illegal, and that there was this undue delay over approvals because of the moratorium.

So the fact that the US has been pushing that they have won the dispute, and that everyone has just got to fall over now and accept GMOs is absolute rubbish! So that's worth bearing in mind.

Looking at some of the options now, what's going on in Europe in terms of countries trying to stay GM-free?

We've got the GMO-free Europe campaign, which I will talk a little more about in a second.

Areas declaring themselves GMO-free is obviously a very powerful political signal. On a country level, there are things that member states can do: they can try and put in place tough "co-existence" legislation – obviously "co-existence" is a bit of a myth! [7] But the stronger the legislation countries put in place, the more difficult it will be in practical terms for companies to grow their GM crops. If you've got a few kilometer separation distances between GM and non-GM crops, that makes it practically very very difficult for companies to introduce their crops in those areas.

There are also options in EU legislation of implementing national bans following the "Safeguard Clause" [8] for approved GM crops, which there are now twelve of in Europe [9].

Then on a Regional or Local level, obviously land-owners have a strong part to play. That includes farmers, Local Authorities, churches – any landowners can decide to ban GMO crops on their own land. And the more landowners doing that, the less area there will be for growing GM crops in the future. The Co-op is an example of a business in the UK that has banned GM crops across its whole business.

Regions across Europe can also join the Network of GMO-free Regions [10] that is being led by Upper Austria and Tuscany – it's an official network of Regions in Europe.

Looking at this opposition, we've now got 172 Regions and over 4,500 Local Governments and smaller areas that wish to be GM-free across [22 EU Member States in] Europe. [11] That's an incredible amount of opposition!

There are twelve national bans on GM foods or crops in seven countries in the EU. In Switzerland they had a referendum last year. They have a fantastic system of democracy in Switzerland – if they vote a certain way in a referendum, it becomes Law. It's incredible! It was a historic vote, where every single Canton or region of Switzerland voted against GMOs, so they now have a moratorium on growing [and on GMO livestock] for five years.

As I said there is an official Network of GMO-free Regions which is 39 Regions now in six countries, and the Assembly of European Regions is also supporting the GMO-free Europe campaign. It's interesting that a lot of these regions are not necessarily anti-GM, they are pro sustainable and organic and traditional agriculture. And because they are seeing it in a much more positive way, they want to protect that kind of agriculture from what they see as the dangers posed by GM farming and contamination. So that's a more positive way of going about the campaigning.

That is just to show you visually about the campaign [12]. We've got this web site which Friends of the Earth has pulled together, and we've also got some leaflets which have the map on that table over there. The green bits are basically all the areas that have declared themselves GMO-free, so you can see it's actually quite a significant proportion of Europe.

Looking at some of the steps that countries have taken, Poland is fantastic: every single region of Poland has declared itself GMO-free from February this year. Poland now joins Austria and Greece as being 100% GM-free; they've also got over 300 GM-free farms and in May 2006 the Parliament has banned all GM seeds. Now this obviously puts them in a direct collision course with the EU, because you're not allowed to do that in the EU – so it will be really interesting to see what comes out of that!

Austria as we know has done an incredible amount, the government is very anti-GM. They've got national bans, their "co-existence" laws are being enacted on a regional level and they're all putting forward very strong legislation. In France they've had this no-GMO municipalities campaign supported by twelve national organizations running for a few years; 1,250 Mayors have signed declarations wanting to be GM-free in their areas; 15 regions and 6 Départements are also part of the campaign. Obviously the French government, as opposed to the Austrian and Polish, is a lot more pro-GM, but it's interesting to see that the GM-free movement is happening in both countries that are pro- and anti-GM.

Another pro-GM country, unfortunately, is my own. The GM-free Britain campaign has been incredibly successful. It's been running since 2002, and we've been working on a very practical level. Of course it's very important politically to be declaring your area GM-free to express that will. But actually there are practical things that you can do as well. We've been working with Local Authorities in the UK to ban GM crops on Council-owned land, to ban GM foods in all their services like school meals and so on, and also to use an obscure part of EU law [13] to apply – if a crop is approved – for a regional geographic Exemption from growing, on the basis of particular environmental reasons. We've got sixty Local Authorities now that are GM-free, and that covers over 18 million people in the UK.

As we know, looking a little bit more at the public opposition in Europe, there is still no market for this damn stuff. Seventy per cent of Europeans don't want GM food and the supermarkets have obviously responded to that, they are not stupid. The supermarkets have eliminated GM foods and food ingredients. And most of the big food companies in Europe have now got non-GM food policies. There are very few GM-labelled foods on the shelves, and these tend to be really obscure products. In the UK for example, we've got bacon-flavoured soya chunks – how that is going to feed the world I really don't know! And food colourings, you know, really ridiculous things.

Some of the protests: just a few pictures to give you an image of what's being going on. This was the tractor-and-trolley protest in London, which I think was probably the first time ever we had five tractors traipsing through London and thousands of people with shopping trolleys rattling through the streets wanting to be GM-free. In Vienna this year, outside the Commission conference on "co-existence" we had the March for GM-free Regions, again about two thousand people outside the conference saying "stop talking about freedom of choice". This conference the Commission was running was called "Freedom of Choice": they are talking about freedom of choice to grow GMOs! The two thousand people outside were talking about freedom of choice to carry on growing and eating GM-free food. And then we had the International GM Opposition Day: in the UK we had beacons being lit across the UK, you can see Wales here as an example, and Dorset.

While this public opposition has been mounting in local areas, we've got an industry becoming increasingly frustrated. Just a few days ago the Chair of EuropaBio (who is also the CEO of BASF – obviously a hated man in this country at the moment [14]) actually stated "We cannot accept a situation whereby these products are proved safe, and countries say 'we do not want this product'. They should get out of the EU and say we want to be on our own!" This is just desperation. He also went on to say "I've not heard that the people of Wales want to be GM-free. Would Wales be allowed to say 'we don't want to have cars?'" It's desperate, really, this industry!

Looking back now, how is the Commission responding to these GM-free zones. Officially, the Commission is against them. But it does accept that it will be difficult to reject these attempts at establishing GM-free zones, which are driven by strong public local concern and by economic considerations such as the protection of local traditional agriculture. So they have acknowledged that, and it is useful to keep it in mind.

So what does the future hold? The way I see it, there is now this growing divide between what the people of Europe want, what Local Governments want, the way they want to take their agriculture – and what the political forces, the biotech companies are trying to do. It's a situation of growing tension, which is only going to come to a head at some point.

What we need is a change in EU law that gives these countries, regions and local areas the right to decide whether GM crops can be grown there. Because after all, it is those local areas that are going to see the impacts when GM crops are grown, so they should have the chance to choose. At the moment, once a crop is approved for growing in Europe, it can be grown anywhere without the local authorities or local people having any say at all.

EU policy really should be supporting the most environmentally friendly and economically viable types of agriculture over GM technology. That should be the predominant force in Europe.

But until then, campaigns across Europe have got to continue doing what we're doing, exploring all the legal and practical avenues we can to stay GM-free. The GM-free areas movement is, I think, a very powerful symbol of opposition not only in Europe, but also for the rest of the world.

Thank you very much.

ENDNOTES

1. Bt maize (corn): a number of different GM maize varieties which are genetically modified to provide protection against the European corn borer (*Ostrinia nubilalis*, ECB) and Mediterranean Corn Borer (*Sesamia nonagrioides*) and/or against corn root worm (*Diabrotica virgifera*).

The Bt maize MON 810 has been approved for cultivation in the EU.

Bt crops are genetically modified with a toxin-producing gene taken from *Bacillus thuringiensis*, a soil bacterium that produces toxins against insects (mainly in the genera *Lepidoptera*, *Diptera* and *Coleoptera*). Bt preparations are used in organic farming as an insecticide, but such sprays show fundamental differences to GM Bt crops because they contain a higher number of different Bt toxins in an un-processed form and because they degrade fast due to UV light. Bt plants however continuously produce one (or maybe two) toxins throughout the whole lifetime of the plant, which increases the selection pressure for the development of resistances. In addition, Bt plants produce a modified form of the toxins that can have impacts on wider groups of insects or other organisms. Bt crops only contain toxins against one or maybe two groups of insects, but not against any other pests. They are not "insect resistant" or "pest resistant" even as those terms are often

used for them. Farmers still need to deal with other pests. Every cell in Bt crops produce this toxin, turning the entire plant into an insecticide. This has led to a report of the deaths of 1,000 sheep who grazed on a Bt cotton field in India.

2. See Greenpeace press release of 4 April 2006 "GE Contamination in Spain: a warning for Europe" www.greenpeace.org/international/press/releases/ge-contamination-in-spain-a-w.

The full report "Impossible Coexistence: Seven years of GMOs have contaminated organic and conventional maize: an examination of the cases of Catalonia and Aragon" can be downloaded from www.greenpeace.org/international/press/reports/impossible-coexistence.

See also "Altered crops in Europe: at what cost" published in the International Herald Tribune on 25 May 2006, available at www.gmfrireland.org/news/2006/may.php - catalunia.

3. For information on the WTO GMO trade dispute filed against the EU by the USA, Canada and Argentina, see www.gmfrireland.org/wto/.
4. At the end of the Irish Presidency of the EU in 2004, just two weeks before leaving office, David Byrne, then EC Commissioner for Health and Consumer Affairs, lifted the EU's de facto embargo on GM crops by legalising 17 varieties of GMO maize, to the fury of the majority of EU member states.

The Irish Government broke its promise never to allow GM food and crops in Ireland (www.gmfrireland.org/resources/documents/IRL/politics/FF/lies.php), played a leading role to legalise them in Europe, and has never voted against them in the EU Parliament or the Council of Ministers. It has also granted numerous GMO crop patent applications, authorised the use of GM animal feed and food, and approved the importation of live GMO seeds despite two Oireachtas briefings which led to unanimous cross-party opposition from TDs and Senators (www.gmfrireland.org/politics/).

5. The European Council of Ministers vote of 15 June 2005 on the Commission proposal to revoke the national bans on GMOs put in place by various Member States was the only occasion when Ireland voted NO on a EC GMO proposal, following extensive lobbying by the GM-free Ireland Network. You can download the GM-free Ireland briefing paper (724 kb PDF file) at www.gmfrireland.org/resources/briefings/GMFIbriefing2.pdf and the full transcript of the Dáil Debate (520kb PDF file) at www.gmfrireland.org/downloads/GMO-15June2005.pdf.
6. For details of the leaked copy of the WTO GMO dispute Interim Report see www.gmfrireland.org/wto.
7. "Co-existence" is the term concocted by the agri-biotech industry to falsely imply that it is possible to release GMO crops into a region without thereby contaminating conventional and organic crops, as well as wild species. Unlike many of its counterparts in other EU member states, the Irish Government has endorsed the European Commission strategy "to ensure the co-existence of GM crops with conventional and organic farming." For details see www.gmfrireland.org/coexistence/.
8. The "Safeguard Clause" refers to Article 19 of the EU Directive on GMOs (2001/18/EC), which allows for specific environments, ecosystems and geographical areas to be exempted from the growing of GM crops.

Because decisions on applications to grow GM crops in Europe are being made on an on-going basis, there is a short window of opportunity for Local Authorities and National Park Authorities in the Republic and the North of Ireland to put in applications for exemption under Article 19, during the consultation period on each GM crop.

Responsible officers need to engage with the decision-making process and prepare their case.

Friends of the Earth (FOE) has published an excellent pamphlet on the subject entitled Keeping your area GM free: a guide to EU decision making for Local Authorities and National Parks which can be downloaded from the FOE web site at www.foe.co.uk/campaigns/real_food/resource/local.html.

Because the process essentially leapfrogs over national governments, the FOE guide prepared for the UK contains much information which is also applicable to the Irish Republic.

We urge all Irish National Park and Local Authorities to download their copy of the guide and liaise with the GM-free Ireland Network if they want to declare their area a GMO-free zone and/or if they want to seek an "exemption" from growing a particular GMO crop that has been approved by the EC in their area.

9. For details of the GM crops "approved" by the European Commission for placing on the market in EU member states see www.saveourseeds.org/en/frame.php?page=kasten_oben_aktuell.
10. The Network of GMO-free Regions: www.gmofree-europe.org/NetworkofGMOfree_regions.htm. Agricultural ministers and their representatives from 20 Regions in Europe have adopted a Charter calling for the right to stay GMO free and for GMO free seeds. The regional governments commit to pursue local and regional regulations and to defend GMO free agriculture and biodiversity in their territories.

Declaration of the European Network of GMO free regions (PDF file): www.gmofree-europe.org/PDFs/GM-free_regions_network_declaration.pdf.

Charter of the Regions and Local Authorities of Europe on the Subject of Coexistence of Genetically Modified Crops with Traditional and Organic Farming (PDF file): www.gmofree-europe.org/PDFs/Charter_network_of_GMOfree_regions.pdf.

The Assembly of European Regions (www.a-e-r.org) is also campaigning for new EC legislation that clearly recognises the democratic right of Regions and Local Authorities to have the final say in whether GMO seeds and crops may be grown in their area. For more on this subject see the GM free Ireland interview with Agnes Ciccarone at www.gmfreeireland.org/interviews/ciccarone.php, and the speech by Benedikt Haerlin at the Green Ireland Conference in June 2006, at www.gmfreeireland.org/conference/trans/haerlin.php.

11. For GMO-free Regions in Europe, see www.gmofree-europe.org and www.gmo-free-regions.org.
12. See note 11 above.
13. Obscure EU law, see note 8 above.
14. BASF, the world's largest chemicals company, made a failed attempt to conduct an experiment with 450,000 GMO potatoes in Ireland in 2006. For details see www.gmfreeireland.org/potato/.