

NEWS RELEASE

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On behalf of the GM-free Ireland Network

www.gmfreeireland.org

CHIEF SCIENTIFIC OFFICER OF IRELAND ACCUSED OF GMO COVER-UP

Dr. Barry McSweeney tried to suppress EU report on GMO crop contamination Time to purge regulatory bodies of biotech industry links

Dr. Barry McSweeney, the Chief Scientific Officer of Ireland who used a fake PhD to obtain his job, attempted to cover-up an official EU study on the risks of GMO crops in 2002.

Before assuming his current post in 2004, Dr. McSweeney was CEO of the EU Joint Research Centre.

While head of that organisation, McSweeney attempted to suppress the publication of the EC's official "Scenarios for Co-existence" report on the feasibility of introducing GM crops in EU member states. The European Commission ordered the study in May 2000 from the Institute for Prospective Technological Studies, which is a branch of the European Union Joint Research Centre.

The study concludes that GM crops inevitably contaminate conventional and organic crops and may cause 40% higher production costs for EU farmers. It states that all farmers would face high additional, in some cases unsustainable costs of production if genetically modified crops were commercially grown in a large scale in Europe (1).

Mr McSweeney wrote to the EC recommending that the report should not be made public, stating "given the sensitivity of the issue, I would suggest that the report be kept for internal use within the Commission only." (2).

According to Greenpeace, the study was delivered to the European Commission in January 2002. Greenpeace released the leaked document on May 16 2002.

In recent days it emerged that McSweeney bought his PhD from the so-called Pacific Western University, an online institution which US authorities describe as a "diploma mill".

McSweeney's ties to the biotech industry include being a former Director of BioResearch Ireland and Biocon Biochemicals.

When McSweeney was head of the EC Joint Research Centre, Ireland played a leading role in legalising the first GMO crops in Europe, especially when our country held the EU Presidency in 2004.

The Irish EU President Pat Cox repeatedly denied the existence of any scientific evidence of GMO health and environmental risks. Just before leaving office in late 2004, the Irish EU Health and Consumer Affairs Commissioner David Byrne ended the de facto moratorium on GM crops by legalising 17 varieties of Monsanto GM maize, to the fury of other EU governments.

Ireland's role as biotech industry stooge continues as the EPA still denies the evidence that GMO crops will inevitably contaminate related species if introduced here. The Food Safety Authority of Ireland (FSAI) claims GMO food is safe, despite the absence of any long-term health studies (3) to prove that this is so, and mounting scientific evidence to the contrary, including reports which Monsanto refuses to make public (4).

The CEO of the Food Safety Authority of Ireland, Dr. John O'Brien is a former Director of a biotech & tobacco industry front organisation called the International Life Sciences Institute based in Washington, DC and of its European branch based in Paris. Its corporate donors include British Sugar Plc, Burger King, Coca-Cola, Interbrew, Mars, Nestle, and Pepsi-Co. The UK based Corporate Watch organisation reported that this lobby group infiltrated the scientific committees of the World Health Organisation and the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation in order to downgrade tobacco health warnings and downplay the evidence that high levels of sugar in junk foods cause childhood obesity and diabetes (5).

GM-free Ireland Network co-ordinator Michael O'Callaghan said " the time has come to purge the Irish regulatory bodies of people with current or past links to the biotech industry, in order to salvage our reputation as the clean green food island" (6).

Attribution:

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Notes for editors:

(1) The 133-page "Scenarios for Co-existence" report can be downloaded as 1.3mb PDF file from:
http://www.gmfreeireland.org/downloads/gmcrops_coexistence.pdf.

The report predicts that the situation would become particularly critical for organic farming of oilseed rape as well as for intensive production of conventional maize. It states that in oilseed rape production the co-existence of GM and non-GM crops in a same region, even when "technically possible", would be "economically difficult" because of the additional costs and complexity of changes required in farming practices in order to avoid genetic contamination. Both organic and conventional farmers "would probably be forced to stop saving seed and instead buy certified seed", because of the increased risk of GM impurity for seeds that have been exposed to field contamination. The study predicts that smaller farms would face relatively higher costs compared to larger entities, and that cultivation of GM and non-GM crops in the same farm "might be an unrealistic scenario, even for larger farms".

The main specific findings of the report were:

- Commercialisation of GE oilseed rape and maize and to a lesser extent potatoes will increase costs of farming for conventional and organic farmers at a range between 10 and 41 per cent of farm prices for oilseed rape and between one and nine percent for maize and potatoes.
- Coexistence of GE farming and organic farming would be actually impossible in many cases.
- Generally, coexistence would only be possible with massive changes in farming practices, especially for conventional farmers; it would also require co-operation between farmers in a region and the willingness of all farmers concerned to participate in such co-operation; it is not clear who would implement these changes, who would be responsible for controlling their correct implementation, who would shoulder their costs.
- Seed and crop purity from GE at a detection level of 0.1 percent would be virtually impossible in most cases, i.e. all products and seeds of oilseed rape and maize would be contaminated with GE to a certain extent.

The study, based on a combination of computer modelling and expert opinion, analysed the consequences of an increase in the share of GE crops. It focused on the three crops of which GE varieties are currently available: oilseed rape for seed production, maize for feed production and potatoes for consumption. The study covered several farm types, both organic and conventional farming. It also considered three different threshold levels for genetic contamination: 0.1 percent (analytical detection level) for all the three crops, 0.3 percent for oilseed rape and 1 percent for maize and potatoes.

(2) The full text of the following related press released may be downloaded from
<http://www.gmfreeireland.org/coexistence/mcsweeney1.pdf>:

- EU Suppresses Study Showing Genetically Engineered Crops Add High Costs For All Farmers And Threaten Organic (Greenpeace press release, 16 May 2002).
- EU: Genetically Engineered Crops Raise Costs, Says Suppressed Study: ;Environmental News Service, 21 May 2002.
- Suppressed EC Study Shows GE Crops Will Be Costly For All: Third World Network press release, 16 May 2002.

(3) In 2000 the Government's Interdepartmental Group on Biotechnology recommended a thorough investigation of the health risks of GM foods. But in October 2005 in response to a letter from the Irish Doctors' Environmental Association, the Food Safety Authority of Ireland stated that neither it nor the European Commission have any plans to identify possible adverse health impacts from these foods on the human population.

The report of the Interdepartmental Group on Modern Biotechnology, published by the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment, October 2000, states:

"We recommend that independent generic research (not limited to any particular product) be conducted in this country into all aspects of GMOs including human health and safety, animal feed and live crops, and the effects of GMOs on the environment, including wildlife and biodiversity, having regard to our distinctive climate and geological conditions."

Letter from Dr. Pat O'Mahoney, Chief Biotechnology Specialist, Food Safety Authority of Ireland (FSAI) to Dr. Elizabeth Cullen, Irish Doctors' Environmental Association, 8 August 2005:

"In response to your recent letter, I can inform you that neither the Food Safety Authority of Ireland, nor the European Commission, as far as I am aware, have any immediate plans to implement surveillance activity to identify possible adverse health impacts on the human population from genetically engineered foods."

(4) For example, the official UK government advisors on GM foods and feeds - ACRE and ACAF - have said that they are not satisfied with the explanation that Monsanto has provided for the observed increased liver weight in rats fed on its genetically modified oilseed rape GT73, which can now be legally imported in all EU member states. ACRE and ACAF are not convinced by EFSA's assurance that GT73 "is as safe as conventional oilseed rape for humans and animals, and in the context of the proposed uses, for the environment." ACAF says it can only draw such conclusion "on receipt of satisfactory data from a further rat-feeding study using 15 per cent oilseed rape meal." Source: Statement by Mr. Elliot Morely, UK Minister for the Environment and Agri-Environment. In: minutes of the UK's European Standing Committee A, Tuesday 2 November 2004.

Greenpeace wrote several letters to national authorities to get hold of the Monsanto data on GT73. After Greenpeace won a court case allowing it access to Monsanto's confidential data of feeding trials with GM maize in June 2005, it was expected that the data on the feeding trials with GT73 would be made public; but so far the documents have not been published. Contrary to EU law German officials explicitly refuse access to the data. Greenpeace is awaiting a reaction from the government of the Netherlands, where Monsanto originally filed the data.

(5) <http://www.corporatewatch.org>

(6) At a Dáil Debate on GT73 in December 2004, the Food Safety Authority of Ireland admitted that it does not have the capacity to conduct GMO risk assessments, and that it depends on what it is told by the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA). Transcript of the Dáil Debate: <http://www.gmfreeireland.org/downloads/GMO-24november2004.pdf>

But the EFSA has itself been widely criticized for failing to conduct comprehensive studies of the health risks of GM foods, and for relying on the risk assessments provided by Monsanto and the other biotech companies it is supposed to regulate. On 6 October, consumer, environmental and health groups across the EU challenged the European Food Safety Authority to fulfil its legal obligations to take into regard the long term safety and scientific uncertainties of GM foods, to review its scientific panels to make them impartial and independent from industry, and to improve its transparency.

See: http://www.efsa.eu.int/stakeholder_stakeholder_consultative_platform

Ten demands for the reform of the EFSA are supported by the European Public Health Alliance, Eurocoop, the European Environmental Bureau, Greenpeace and Friends of the Earth. The demands can be downloaded from: http://www.foeeurope.org/publications/2005/EFSA_stakeholders_challenge.pdf

In November 2004 Friends of the Earth published "Throwing caution to the wind", a detailed critique of the EFSA and its work on GM foods. The report can be downloaded here: <http://www.foeeurope.org/GMOs/publications/EFSAreport.pdf>

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