

# PRESS RELEASE

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## TWO GOVERNMENTS CALL FOR IRELAND TO BECOME GM-FREE ZONE

Agriculture Ministers from the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland confirmed their plans for the island of Ireland to be declared a GM-free zone [1] at a conference attended by Carlo Petrini, the President of Slow Food International, and the Irish President Mary McAleese, in Waterford last week.

In keynote speeches [2] at the Terra Madre Ireland 2008 conference on food and farming policy [3] organised by Slow Food Ireland [4] on Friday, the Irish Minister of State for Food and Horticulture, Trevor Sargent TD, and the Northern Ireland Minister for Agriculture and Rural Affairs, Michelle Gildernew MP called for the island of Ireland to be declared off-limits to the release of GM crops [5]. This follows similar calls by the Scottish Government and the Welsh Assembly.

In a section of his speech which drew rousing applause from the audience, Minister Trevor Sargent said

“The whole GM debate is for me, like for many people here, at the heart of sustainability and the empowerment of people to grow food. If that power is taken away — and the corporate spin is certainly very strong in the direction of some kind of silver bullet being available through GM — we’ll have gone beyond the point from which it’s very difficult to come back. So we are in this generation, I believe, holding a very important responsibility. And when we look at the experience of farmers — and I think it’s important to talk to farmers rather than to their corporate masters and their professionally-paid spin doctors — the farmers are saying GM is not the panacea for them. Whether you go to the universities which have been carrying out these studies — in Nebraska and Kansas, from Iowa to India — they tell you that farmers have been experiencing not greater but less yield, losing money, and losing market share. The exact opposite of the spin that is being put out there.

And that’s before we talk about the health risks (and they do have to be talked about), the superweeds, the fossil fuel dependency (which Colin Sage [6] eloquently pointed out here we cannot continue with – we have to move on from our short-term flirtation with fossil fuels, they are not going to be around to get us out of this particular hole that we have dug for ourselves).

So I do feel that the GM debate is, in that context, a dangerous distraction from the fundamental challenges that have to be faced up to. And the option for us in Ireland is very clear: *Ireland — the food island*: we can sell that! The green clean food island – they really want that in Germany, as we heard from Professor Ham [7] last night at the organic conference. Anywhere you go where our main markets are, they want that green clean food island. How about if Bord Bia [the Irish Food Board] tries to sell *Ireland — the GM laboratory*? I wonder how that would go down. Well let me tell you, that would be the end!

So I am particularly glad that Minister Gildernew is here because — she will speak for herself but I have some idea of her opinions on this from the discussions we’ve had in the past — the Programme for Government does not mince its words but also does not take anything for granted. We have to negotiate the establishment of Ireland as a GM-free zone. And that means live GMOs, that means release.

The Northern Ireland Minister for Agriculture and Rural Affairs, Michelle Gildernew MP, said:

“We must protect the diversity of both plants and animals, and avoid damaging natural resources and contributing to climate change... Once we go down the GM route there is no going back: we need to keep Ireland GM-free. And I think that issue – we might not fully recognise it now, but in a very short period of time we could have a unique selling point that nobody else in the world has. And I think as an island economy, we have to protect our status.”

### A new approach to agriculture

Slow Food International President Carlo Petrini, (author of *Slow Food Nation*) complemented the Ministers’ GM-free policy statements and those which resulted from some of the 40 conference workshops, adding “On this historical day, great work has been done by the small-scale farmers, fishers, artisan producers chefs, students and citizens who have come here to reaffirm the need for a new approach to agriculture”. [8]

No GM crops are grown in Ireland, and there is no realistic prospect for this to change. The only GM crop authorised for cultivation in the EU — Monsanto’s patented MON810 maize – is modified to produce a pesticide against the European corn borer which does not exist in Ireland. In two regions of Spain (the only place in the EU where it is grown commercially) the GM maize has contaminated conventional and organic crops and seeds, leading to economic losses and patent infringement lawsuits against contaminated farmers.

## GM animal feed

Ireland is the EU's biggest importer of GM animal feed, widely used to produce non-organic meat, poultry and dairy produce (sold without a GM label). The industrial mass-production of the two main animal feed crops, GM soya and maize, requires large-scale monocultures and increased use of toxic weedkillers, pesticides and fungicides, with devastating agronomic, health, environmental, economic and social consequences at the far end of the food chain. In South America, soy production for EU livestock has caused the destruction of 21 million hectares of forest in Brazil, 14 million in Argentina, and two million in Paraguay. The Irish cattle, sheep, pig and poultry sectors are eating up the Amazon!

Speaking of animal feed imports, Minister Michelle Gildernew said that Ireland's food production strategy requires "the sustaining of our land and resources to ensure that primary ingredients are available without having to resort to costly imports that increase food miles, and the environmental consequences that come with that."

In relation to sourcing GM-free animal feed, Minister Trevor Sargent said:

"I know there are issues, and I spoke with Vincent Carton [9], Derek Dean [10] and many others about the difficulty of finding [animal] feed that is GM-free. But GM-free feed is not where the heart of this debate is. The heart of this debate is Ireland being able to say "We are GM-free" when it comes to release, to crops, to the food we produce from our own primary resources. More and more people hopefully will be encouraged by that market for GM-free produce to grow more tillage that is GM-free."

Contrary to agri-biotech industry propaganda disseminated by the Irish Grain and Feed Association, Teagasc and the Irish Farmers Journal, certified non-GMO animal feed is available, affordable, and widely used in the majority of EU member states that have banned or restricted the cultivation of GM crops, and in the 43 EU Regions that have adopted Quality Agriculture strategies which avoid the use of GM animal feed. [11]

Michael O'Callaghan, who co-ordinates the GM-free Ireland Network [12], said:

"Instead of competing in a race to the bottom against cheap GM-fed meat imports, Ireland can become the EU market leader for quality GM-free meat and dairy produce. Phasing out the use of GM feed imports would give Irish meat, poultry and dairy produce a unique selling point in the world food market. The grass-based diet of our cattle and sheep gives us a lead start in this regard, since most Irish farmers rely less on GM feed than their competitors in many other EU member states. Together with our green image, our geographic isolation (which minimises the risk of transboundary contamination from wind-borne GM pollen), and the least polluted topsoil in Europe, this policy would give us the most credible GM-free food brand in the world — a sustainable competitive advantage that would benefit our food, farm and tourism sectors for generations to come.

## Policy recommendations

Michael O'Callaghan of the GM-free Ireland Network urged both governments to implement their policy with:

- a ban on the cultivation of MON810 maize (as in Austria, France, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Poland and *de facto* in Germany) and a moratorium on the release of GM crops (as in France and Switzerland); [13]
- strict measures to prevent the importation of live GM seeds (including oilseed rape) which are approved by the EU only for use as animal feed and/or processing into agrofuels, to prevent the irreversible contamination of related cultivated crops and wild species that would result from inevitable seed spills that would occur during unloading, storage and transportation;
- mandatory labelling of GM food sold in restaurants, hotels, pubs etc. (as in the UK);
- mandatory labeling of meat, poultry and dairy produce from livestock fed on GM animal feed; [14]
- an all-island public conference to inform stakeholders about the agronomic, ecological, environmental, health, economic, legal and food security aspects of GM food and farming, with international experts from both sides of the debate;
- measures to ensure that members of the Irish Grain and Feed Association and other animal feed importers make certified non-GM feed available to Irish farmers on both sides of the border; [15]
- a non-GMO certification scheme for top quality meat, poultry and dairy produce from livestock fed a GM-free diet.

[ENDS]

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## NOTES TO THE EDITOR

1. The European Commission refuses to recognise the democratic right of member states and regions to set up GM-free zones to ban the cultivation of GM crops, but 10 member states, 143 EU Regions and 4,500 smaller areas in 22 EU member states have already done so (including Scotland and Wales). See maps of GM-free zones in Ireland at <http://www.gmfreeireland.org/map/> and in Europe at <http://www.gmfreeireland.org/EUmap.php>.

Earlier this year, the Irish Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government, John Gormley TD, said "Ireland is the best place for a GM-free zone in the EU."

Last Wednesday, the German Agriculture Minister Horst Seehofer said EU member states should have the power to block genetically-modified crops in their countries, adding that he intends to give power to decide on GMO cultivation to small local government authorities rather than taking decisions at federal or state level.

The European Network of GMO-free regions will hold its fifth annual conference in Lucerne, Switzerland on 24-25 April 2009 on the theme "Food and Democracy". Download programme at [http://www.genet-info.org/fileadmin/files/genet/Lucerne\\_2009/Food\\_and\\_Democracy.pdf](http://www.genet-info.org/fileadmin/files/genet/Lucerne_2009/Food_and_Democracy.pdf)

For more information see <http://www.gmo-free-regions.org>, <http://www.genet-info.org> and <http://www.planet-diversity.org>

2. Listen to the speeches by Trevor Sargent and Michelle Gildernew (16MB MP3 download): [http://www.4shared.com/file/62311211/6eda7319/Sargent\\_and\\_Gildernew.html](http://www.4shared.com/file/62311211/6eda7319/Sargent_and_Gildernew.html)

3. The Terra Madre Ireland 2008 conference took place at the Waterford Institute of Technology, with 40 workshop seminars and plenary sessions on the theme of "A Sustainable Future for the Irish Food Industry". See <http://sloweb.slowfood.com/sloweb/eng/dettaglio.lasso?cod=5700E3EA1631c2AF4BQWs370A3DA> and <http://sloweb.slowfood.com/sloweb/eng/dettaglio.lasso?cod=C101B8FE1618c2EE78sJmVuE2DD0>

An online public discussion forum on GM food and farming may be found on the Terra Madre Ireland website at <http://www.terramadreibreland.org> (login from their home page).

4. Slow Food Ireland is part of Slow Food International, a non-profit, eco-gastronomic member-supported organisation founded in 1989 to counteract fast food and fast life, the disappearance of local food traditions and people's dwindling interest in the food they eat, where it comes from, how it tastes and how our food choices affect the rest of the world. Slow Food has over 85,000 members in 132 countries. For more info see <http://www.slowfood.com> and <http://www.slowfoodireland.com> See also the book "Slow Food Nation: Why Our Food Should Be Good, Clean, And Fair" by Carlo Petrini, with a foreword by Alice Waters: available from Amazon.com.

5. The agreed programme for the Irish Government, announced by the Minister of State for Food and Horticulture Trevor Sargent TD in June 2007, is "to seek to negotiate to declare the island of Ireland as a GM-free zone." The policy, which has not yet been implemented, aims to introduce legislation to prevent the environmental release of GM algae, bacteria, seeds, crops, trees, insects, crustaceans, fish, and livestock. (The policy would also discourage, but not prohibit, the importation of GM animal feed that has been approved by the EC regulatory bodies, but would not have any effect on the contained use of GM bacteria for the production of medicines in sealed vats in biosecure laboratories.) The Government's commitment to the policy has been repeated in subsequent statements by the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, Brendan Smith TD, and by the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government, John Gormley TD, who said "Ireland is the best place for a GM-free zone in the EU."

6. Colin Sage is a Senior Lecturer in Environmental Geography at University College Cork, teaching courses such as the Geography of the Global Food System and Environmental Policy: [http://www.ucc.ie/academic/geography/pages/staff/sage\\_c.htm](http://www.ucc.ie/academic/geography/pages/staff/sage_c.htm). He also is Director and Research Associate with Eco-Innovation: <http://www.eco-innovation.net/colin-sage> and Associate Editor of the International Journal of Agricultural Sustainability: <http://www.earthscanjournals.com/ijas/default.htm>

7. At the National Organic Food Conference organized by Bord Bia at the Waterford Institute of Technology on 4 September, Professor Ulrich Hamm (Agricultural & Food Marketing, Faculty of Organic Agricultural Sciences, University of Kassel, Germany) gave a presentation on the size, trends and growth within the German organic sector. Topics included the main consumer drivers fuelling growth, the route to market trends, and potential opportunities for Irish companies, barriers to entry and key learnings / recommendations for companies interested in targeting this market. For conference details see: <http://www.bordbia.ie/eventsnews/events/Pages/NationalOrganicFoodConference2008.aspx>

8. Slow Food International opposes the use of GM food and farming. See <http://www.slowfoodireland.org>, <http://www.slowfood.com>, and interview with Slow Food Vice-President Vandana Shiva at <http://multimedia.slowfood.com/index.php?lng=2&method=multimedia&action=zoom&id=24086>

9. Vincent Carton is CEO of the 200 year-old company Carton Bros, the owner of Manor Farm, the largest processor of chicken meat in the Republic of Ireland. The Carton Group processes over half a million chickens a week, both conventional and free-range, without the use of antibiotic growth promoters and genetically modified feedstuffs.

10. Derek Deane is Deputy President of the Irish Farmers Association: <http://www.ifa.ie>

11. In December 2007, the EU Committee of the Regions and the European Network of GMO-free Regions co-hosted the European Conference on GM-free Animal feed: Quality production and European regional agricultural strategy, in Brussels. Regional Governments, farmers organisations, animal feed importers, feed compounders, food retailers and consumer groups representing 43 European Regions and key players from Switzerland, Brazil, the USA, Canada, India and China met to co-ordinate agreed Quality Agriculture strategies for the production of meat, poultry and dairy produce from livestock fed on certified Non-GMO soya products, including, marketing, supplies, certification, eco-social considerations, retail strategies, and related aspects of CAP reform. The conference found that Europe produces a surplus of GM-free maize, and can also meet its requirement for certified GM-free soya feed from global markets, but that security of supply requires regional coordination and forward planning. Participants called for CAP reform to include an EC label to support the market for meat and dairy produce from livestock fed on certified non-GMO feedstuffs. Download conference report by GM-free Ireland (large 3.2MB pdf file): <http://www.gmfreeireland.org/feed/documents/GMFI-GM-free-Soya-conf.pdf>

Interested stakeholders should attend the 2nd International Non-GMO soy Summit from 7-9 October in Brussels: <http://www.nongmosoysummit.com>

12. The GM-free Ireland Network is a coalition of 130 food and farming organisations, restaurants, chefs, food businesses, NGOs, doctors, students, citizens, and local authorities collaborating to keep Ireland free of GM food and farming. We have the largest number and broadest diversity of stakeholders of any Non Governmental Organisation on this island. As of September 2008, our 32,000 organisational members and the counties and towns which oppose the cultivation of GM crops represent over one million citizens. Please support our lobbying and public awareness campaigns. Annual membership fees are €25 for individuals, €100 for non-profit organisations, €500 for businesses. Larger contributions are welcome. Please make out your cheque to "GM-free Ireland" and mail it to us at this address: GM-free Ireland Network • Little Alders, Knockrath, Rathdrum, Co. Wicklow, Ireland • tel +353 (0)404 43885 • email: [mail@gmfreeireland.org](mailto:mail@gmfreeireland.org) • website: <http://www.gmfreeireland.org>

13. For details of country bans on GMOs see <http://www.gmo-free-regions.org>, <http://www.genet-info.org> and <http://www.planet-diversity.org>

14. In 2007, a million citizens of EU member states signed a petition demanding mandatory labelling of GM-fed animal produce, based on the fundamental right to information for consumer choice. In 2008, leading EU retailers began extending their existing GM food bans to exclude such produce. 43 European Regions have since adopted Quality Agriculture non-GM strategies to add value to their meat and dairy produce, which may now carry a GM-free label in Germany. The good news is that Ireland's mostly grass-fed beef and sheep consume less GM feed than many of their EU competitors. This gives our farmers a valuable head start in the transition to a GM-free food chain.

15. Monsanto, Cargill and other transnational agri-biotech corporations and commodity traders, together with Teagasc, the Irish Farmers Association, the Irish Grain and Feed Association —and their friends in government, academia and the media— continue to claim that non-GM animal feed is unavailable or unaffordable. European maize is abundant and 99% GM-free; Brazil can supply the entire EU market for soy meal from certified sustainable non-GM sources. And peak oil will soon favour local production over expensive imports. Five steps are required for Ireland to kick the GM habit:

- Feed importers must stop withholding non-GM feed used by our EU competitors;
- Security of supply requires regional coordination and forward planning;
- A non-GM certification scheme is needed for meat, poultry & dairy produce;
- Our food security requires local self-reliance for food and feed production;
- Retailers, food processors, restaurants and consumers can take the lead by supporting GM-free farmers and food producers.