

PRESS RELEASE

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EU CITIZENS SHOULD NOT BE FORCE-FED GM FOOD — Former Chair, European Food Safety Authority

DUBLIN, IRELAND – In a video released on YouTube yesterday [1], the former Chairman of the European Food Safety Authority [2], Prof Patrick Wall [3], says people have lost confidence in EFSA's ability to assess the risks of GM food. "Do we want corporate giants to own the food chain? GM food has no benefits for consumers... EFSA is a consumer protection agency; it is not meant to rubberstamp biotech dossiers... We cannot force-feed European citizens products that they don't want. We live in a democracy. People have a right to have objections... If people don't want (GM) technology they have a right not to have it."

Prof Wall's remarks came ahead of today's meeting of the EU Council of Environment Ministers, whose agenda includes reform of EFSA's GMO risk assessment process with credible research and consideration of new scientific evidence of the health and environmental dangers of GM animal feed and food [4].

EU Council of Ministers debate EFSA reform following accusation of fraud by European Parliament

The European Parliament submitted a Petition to the EU Commission last week, accusing EFSA of failing to comply with EU regulations to protect the right of EU citizens to safe food. "EFSA ignores scientific evidence that GM animal feed and food are dangerous, and continues to rely on secret dossiers with partial, selective, and biased 'advocacy science' submitted by the applicant companies — which cannot be fully examined by independent scientists for peer review. Such practices are fraudulent, and place Europeans at risk since GM crops and foods cleared as 'safe' on the basis of dossier evidence may in fact be dangerous." [5]

EU Commission must change the rules

Although Prof Wall personally believes GM foods approved by EFSA are safe, he said EFSA's GMO panel is "populated by experts who are comfortable with the technology; you have a lot of molecular scientists who have been playing around with recombinant DNA technology since 1969... and many of them use it in their laboratories and their research institutions and they're quite comfortable with it; and so — for them — they wouldn't see the same risks that maybe a citizen would see or someone that wasn't familiar with the technology". He likened the situation to a motorbike convention: "if you ask the motorbike riders 'do you think riding a motorbike is dangerous?' they say 'no', whereas other people would think they're half crazy!"

"There is a criticism by many people that the dossiers submitted to EFSA are prepared by the companies. And so, obviously, the companies would present data that are more favourably disposed to their varieties and products. We have in the scientific literature a thing called 'publication bias' — literature with positive findings is more likely to be published than issues with negative findings... There is a huge issue with consumer confidence.... Consumers would be more confident if we had more publicly-funded research, where the researchers had no vested interests in getting their products over the line. Perhaps we should look at the other dimensions to the technology... like ethical issues [with] other disciplines sitting around the table."

"Science is an evolving subject, and nobody can say there's absolutely no risk. Of course there's a risk! So therefore you have to assess the risk with all the available information... People have to have confidence in the process, and if people haven't got confidence in the process, the process has to be changed! Could EFSA's risk assessment be improved? Could there be a completely different procedure required to enter the approvals process into the EU? Of course it could! But that would be a decision taken by the Commission."

US approvals for GM food not acceptable for EU citizens

The USA, Canada and the agri-biotech industry recently convinced EU President Barosso to set up a "Sherpa group" to side-step EU Agriculture, Health and Environment ministers who refuse to scrap the EU "zero tolerance" for GMOs that have been "deregulated" by the US Food and Drug Administration without proper oversight, but that are not approved in the EU [6]. Commenting on the US approval system, Prof Wall said "European citizens would not accept that same arrangement... We had a BSE crisis and the Dioxin crisis. EFSA is a consumer protection agency — not something to rubberstamp biotechnology dossiers!"

Ireland's GM-free policy

"Ireland is a unique small country, it's an island, we're potentially the bread-basket of Europe. And Irish farmers have a high cost-base. So we need to see how to differentiate ourselves in a global marketplace from other countries that have economies of scale... I would like to see us in Ireland looking at the pros and cons of being GM-free as opposed to being just another intensive farming country. Can we deliver a competitive advantage to Irish farmers by being GM-free? If there's an economic advantage in being GM-free, farmers will consider it. At the moment we don't even get into the discussion: farmers are told 'if they don't go forward with the technology, they're going to lose out, and be left behind, and they will be commercially non-viable'. Well, we haven't had a proper debate!" [7]

[ENDS]

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NOTES TO THE EDITOR

1. Watch the video interview by Michael O'Callaghan at <http://www.gmfreeireland.org/efsa/index.php>
Interview transcript: <http://www.gmfreeireland.org/efsa/GMFI-PatrickWall-interview.pdf>
Format: High definition broadcast quality (HD XDCAM, 16:9 aspect ratio); running time: 26 minutes 40 seconds. Credits: Producer / director / interviewer: Michael O'Callaghan, Co-ordinator, GM-free Ireland Network. Camera / sound / web processing: Eoin Campbell. Produced for the GM-free Ireland Network by Global Vision Consulting Ltd in association with Just MultiMedia
2. EFSA is the EU Agency mandated by the European Commission to provide its opinion on the safety of conventional and genetically modified animal feed and food for the entire food and feed supply chains, and on issues directly impacting on these such as animal welfare, animal health and plant health:
<http://www.efsa.europa.eu>
3. Professor Patrick Wall (MB, BOA, BCh, MVB, MBA, MRCVS) was the Chair of the European Food Safety Authority Management Board from September 2006 - June 2008. He is Associate Professor of Public Health in University College Dublin's School of Public Health and Population Sciences (www.ucd.ie/phps) which hosts the National Nutrition Surveillance Centre (www.nnsc.ie). His teaching and research interests include food borne diseases, lifestyle related diseases and health damaging consumer behaviour. He is a co-director of the UCD Centre for Behaviour and Health (<http://geary.ucd.ie/behaviour>). He was the first Chief Executive of the Irish Food Safety Authority (www.fsai.ie) which is currently run by Dr. John O'Brien, a former Director of the biotech industry lobby group, International Life Sciences Institute! Prof. Wall was one of seven non-Chinese nationals on the committee overseeing food safety arrangements for the 2008 Beijing Olympics. He is also the Chairperson of the (Irish) Mental Health Commission's Research Committee, and is a member of the Food Safety Authority of Ireland's Healthy Eating Guidelines steering committee. Prof Wall bio:
<http://www.ucd.ie/foodandhealth/people/academicstaff/profpatrickwall/home/>
4. Reforming the European Food Safety Authority: <http://www.gmfreeireland.org/efsa/index2.php>
Austrian report: Biological effects of transgenic maize NK603xMON810, 11 November 2008:
<http://www.greenpeace.org/eu-unit/press-centre/reports/Biological-effects-of-transgenic-maize-NK603xMON810>
Greenpeace calls on Commission to shut down EFSA GMO panel, 31 October 2008:
<http://www.greenpeace.org/eu-unit/press-centre/press-releases2/Shut-down-EFSA-GMO-panel>
GMO orientation debate - Environment Council, 20 October 2008:
<http://www.greenpeace.org/eu-unit/press-centre/reports/GMO-orientation-debate-Environment-Council>
The EU GMO environmental risk assessment needs reforming, 30 September 2008:
<http://www.greenpeace.org/eu-unit/press-centre/policy-papers-briefings/Reform-of-EU-GMO-risk-assessment>
Flaws in the EU authorisation process for GMOs: <http://www.greenpeace.org/raw/content/eu-unit/press-centre/policy-papers-briefings/flaws-in-the-EU-authorisation.pdf>
5. EU Parliament Petition No. 0813/2008: The importance of impartiality within EFSA & the food safety rights of EU citizens. From Dr. Brian John, GM-free Cymru. Hosted by Kathy Sinnott MEP (Ireland South).
http://www.gmfreecymru.org/pivotal_papers/petition.htm
6. EU animal feed imports and GMO policy: <http://www.greenpeace.org/eu-unit/press-centre/policy-papers-briefings/eu-animal-feed-imports-and-gmo-policy>
7. The Irish media provide scant and biased coverage of GM issues, despite the fact that GM crops are banned or restricted across the EU. For see <http://www.gmo-free-regions.org>, <http://www.genet-info.org> and <http://www.planet-diversity.org>