

# Whole Foods, Whole World

## A Global Voice for Consumers

*As globalisation, trade liberalisation and deregulation advance, governments retreat. The fight to protect consumer rights is moving to the international arena.*

## Codex Alimentarius: Forum for Food Safety

In the quest for safe food, Codex is critical. "Decisions on all of our national food standards are now made in Rome (where Codex is headquartered)," says CI Vice President Louise Sylvan. The importance of Codex extends beyond its recommendations on food safety and reaches into international trade, where the World Trade Organisation accepts Codex norms as a reference point for the settlement of trade disputes.

In the absence of Codex-approved and accepted international norms for GM foods, countries that adopt national regulations — such as labelling requirements or import bans — may find themselves accused of creating "discriminatory" and WTO-illegal barriers to trade.

While open to participation from all governments, few developing countries can afford to monitor the Codex process closely, and meetings are generally dominated by the developed countries — especially North America and Europe, whose national del-

egations tend to push a "commercial agenda," says Sri Ram Khanna of India's VOICE consumer group. Last year, CI protested the "unacceptable influence of business interests" following revelations that a US consultant to the Codex committee assessing BST safety had passed confidential documents to Monsanto, the company that sells the controversial bovine milk hormone.

Industry voices predominate over public interest groups. A 1993 analysis of Codex representation found that 49% of the accredited US delegates were from industry, 44% of the Japanese, 31% of the British and 61% of the Swiss. Nearly all industry representatives came from large global corporations: small businesses and farmers were virtually absent. Just 0.4% of the total delegates came from consumer and public interest groups. Codex has since taken steps to increase consumer participation, but the balance remains skewed.

While CI is sometimes the lone voice for consumers at Codex, it commands respect there for its authoritative contributions. CI participates as a non-voting observer in numerous technical committees (for example, food labelling, pesticides residues, veterinary medicines) and the General Principles committee. The latter is responsible for establishing criteria for decision-making in Codex, and recently debated the role of non-science factors.

CI has staged two major lobbying campaigns for GM labelling at the Codex Committee on Food Labelling. At the latest session, in April 1999, the United States and Argentina (both GM crop exporters) stood alone in opposition to mandatory labelling. But Codex continues to deliberate, leaving CI's Julian Edwards to ask CCFL members "just whose interests are being served by efforts to resist — indeed to reverse — what is going on out there in the real world?"

Codex Alimentarius Commission website: [www.fao.org/es/esn/codex](http://www.fao.org/es/esn/codex)

## Codex Launches New Biotech Task Force

CI members are mobilising to influence the first session of the Codex Ad Hoc Inter-Governmental Task Force on Foods Derived from Biotechnology, to be held in Tokyo from March 14-17, 2000. Thai NGOs, for example, are asking that environmental, ethical, social and economic aspects be considered in setting GM food safety parameters, in addition to scientific criteria.

Created in 1999, the Task Force will "develop standards, guidelines or recommendations, as appropriate, for foods derived from biotechnology or traits introduced into foods by

biotechnology, on the basis of scientific evidence, risk analysis and with regard, where appropriate, to other legitimate factors relevant to the health of consumers and the promotion of fair trade practices."

### Coming Up:

- Codex Committee on General Principles, April 11-14, Paris
- Codex Committee on Food Labelling, May 8-12, Ottawa

# A Sampler of CI Positions at Codex

## Mandatory Labelling of Genetically Modified Foods

CI believes that a major change in food production such as genetic modification requires labelling because of the fundamental right of consumers to know what they are buying. Like other production processes such as food irradiation, it requires labelling to identify that this process has taken place. The argument against labelling of GM foods on the basis of lack of traceability and process control is not acceptable when Codex has accepted labelling for organic and *halal* food production. Codex has a responsibility to address the issue as a matter of urgency, since these foods are already being traded internationally

CI calls upon Codex to acknowledge consumers' fundamental right to information to make informed choices in the marketplace by requiring mandatory labelling for all genetically modified foods. This labelling should cover all foods produced using GM substances, including (1) food containing GM ingredients or GM organisms, as well as (2) foods produced from

GM ingredients processed to the extent that these ingredients are no longer detectable (such as oil from GM canola, soya lecithin or other additives).

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— *CI's comments to Proposed Draft Recommendations for Labelling of Foods Obtained through Biotechnology, Codex Committee on Food Labelling, April 1999*

## Precautionary Principle

CI considers that it is essential that the precautionary principle is recognised and upheld within Codex. We suggest the following wording: "The precautionary principle should apply in cases when the scientific evidence is not conclusive enough to establish control measures based on a sound and accurate risk assessment, but there is a necessity to take measures for the purposes of protecting public health, safety or the environment."

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— *CI's comments on proposed Working Principles for Risk Analysis, Codex Committee on General Principles, 1999*

## Role of Science

It is evident to CI that many "other factors" (non-science factors) are now part of risk analysis on food safety issues ... In all cases, science is a necessary basis for decision, but never a sufficient basis in itself. Science itself is not value-free, and even analyses and decisions made by scientific bodies typically are based on both scientific and non-scientific considerations. "Other factors" ... include subjective value judgements and social choices in risk analysis ... how to treat scientific uncertainty and perceptions as to which risks are "significant" ... economic concerns ... and the benefits of the substance that poses the risks. Ethical issues, such as the rights and responsibilities of all involved parties, also enter the picture.

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— *"The Role of Science and 'Other Factors' in Codex Decisions", presented by CI to the Codex Committee on General Principles, 1998*

## CI Briefings and Presentations

*Food Security: The New Millennium*, a book-length collection of presentations given at CI's International Conference on Food Security, Penang (1999)

"Biotechnology and Other Aspects of Food Safety: Consumer Concerns" presentation to the OECD (1999)

"Review of the Statements of Principle on the Role of Science and the Extent to which 'Other Factors' Should Be Taken into Account: Application in the Case of BST" (1999)

"Why We Need Labelling of Genetically Engineered Food" (1998)

"Summary of Consumer Surveys Related to Labelling of Foods Produced Using Biotechnology" (1998)

"Risk Communication in the Context of Common Perceptions of Risks" (1998)

"Hormones in Milk Production: The Case Against" (1997)

"Genetically Modified Foods: Magic Solution or Hidden Menace?" (1997)

"Safe Food For All" 1996 World Consumer Rights Day Kit

"Food of the Future: Risks and Realities of Biotechnology" 1995 Conference Report

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CI website: [www.consumersinternational.org](http://www.consumersinternational.org)

# WTO: Free Trade, Food Trade

The World Trade Organisation is the international body that sets the rules of global commerce — rules that make it difficult for countries to refuse products or technology, even if they hold legitimate concerns about potential impacts on health or environment. Under WTO regulations, nations can only exclude agricultural products from their markets for reasons of “sound science” — concrete evidence of health or environmental dangers — or face trade sanctions.

The United States/European Union wrangle over GM food pits protection against protectionism within a wider tangle over farm and food subsidies. The US, the world's biggest exporter of GM crops, maintains that GM labelling requirements, cultivation bans and other regulatory measures may constitute WTO-illegal trade barriers, since they are unsupported by convincing evidence of harm. European officials, however, argue that not enough studies have been done and that lack of evidence of harm is not proof of safety. The US has explicitly threatened several EU rules on GM foods with WTO action, but has so far refrained from filing any formal challenges.

**“Are your hands tied by weeds? Roundup will set you free!”  
Billboard in India advertising Monsanto's Roundup herbicide.**

Farmers' Link

Three WTO agreements may constrain the possibility of national action restricting or regulating entry of GMOs. The Sanitary and Phytosanitary (SPS) agreement requires any national regulations blocking GMO imports to be based on scientific data, even though lack of scientific certainty about GMOs is one of the reasons why governments seek to regulate them.

The WTO's Technical Barriers to Trade (TBT) agreement requires governments to use the least trade-restrictive rules when setting standards for products, including GM foods. Labelling a product to identify it as containing GMOs may fall under TBT rules.

The Trade Related Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPs) agreement creates international patent and commercial rights that may conflict with national policy goals for food security and biodiversity. The developing world seeks to cancel further extension of international patents to living organisms, including genes from plants. Article 27.3 of the TRIPs was up for review in November 1999 at the WTO's Third Ministerial Meeting in Seattle, where failure to agree left the issue pending for future negotiations.

## EU/US: Battle Over Beef

The WTO ruled against a European Union ban on beef containing artificial hormone residues because the EU could not prove scientifically that residues in meat harm human health. (The actual hormones are known to do so.) The WTO approved US\$116.8 million in sanctions after the EU refused to cave in and accept the meat.

A vital element of the WTO ruling against the EU's ban is the requirement that the

EU standard be based on international standards set by Codex Alimentarius. The Codex standard, which is extremely controversial, allows for residues of artificial hormones in beef. (And Codex procedures allow for undue industry influence and politicisation of what should be health-based rule-making.

Codex issued a standard permitting residues of artificial hormones in beef after a four-year US campaign to gain its ap-

proval. The US forced two votes on the issue, which is almost unheard of at Codex (which usually sets standards by consensus), losing the first and winning the second, where the hormone residue standard was adopted by a slim majority.

The insistence of EU consumers that their meat be free of artificial hormones residues has become a major WTO test: consumer rights vs the WTO and Codex international food standards.

— *Whose Trade Organization? Corporate Globalization and the Erosion of Democracy* by Lori Wallach and Michele Sforza. Public Citizen (US), 1999. Website: [www.citizen.org](http://www.citizen.org)

## Food Battle in Seattle

The "Battle in Seattle," as the WTO's November meeting has come to be known, raged in both conference halls and city streets. Inside the trade forum, the United States, Japan and Canada attempted to form a biotechnology working group to discuss WTO rules on GM foods through "a fact-finding mandate on the relationship between trade, development, health, consumer and environmental issues in the area of modern biotechnology."

Opponents — including EU Environment Ministers — argued that introducing biotechnology as a distinct trade issue within the WTO "could lead to new restrictions on the right of governments to require labelling (of GM foods) and promote consumers' right-to-know." Opponents also feared that the proposal could undermine upcoming UN negotiations on the Biosafety Protocol, which stalled in 1999 over issues related to GMOs (*see below*).

Failure to create the proposed working group at the WTO Ministerial meeting does not mean that labelling of GM foods is free from the threat of WTO sanctions. But the WTO has no additional mandate to negotiate the issue, at least for now.

Meanwhile, on the streets, clashes between police and protesters underscored the anger of grassroots activists opposed to WTO influence over domestic food and trade policies and demanding a voice in the debate.

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World Trade Organisation website: [www.wto.org](http://www.wto.org)

## CI on GMOs at the WTO

■ **Informed Choice:** Measures to support informed choice should not be undermined by the WTO. For example, the labelling of genetically modified foods should not be threatened by WTO rules. (In accordance to the WTO's Technical Barriers to Trade agreement), GM and non-GM products are dissimilar products and should be labelled accordingly. (And) GM labels are the least trade-restrictive method for informing consumers about GM products.

■ **Precautionary Approach:** WTO members should make greater use of the precautionary approach to food safety as facilitated by the WTO's Sanitary and Phytosanitary (SPS) Agreement

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— from "Consumer Rights and the Multilateral Trading System: What Needs to be Done before a Millennium Round" CI, August 1999, and CI campaign briefing papers.

Alexandre Valentin

## Biosafety Protocol: New Push for Environmental Rules

In February 1999, Environment Ministers from 140 countries met in Cartagena, Colombia to draw up a treaty to address threats posed by GMOs to biological diversity. The proposed Biosafety Protocol to the 1992 UN Convention on Biological Diversity included measures for tracking and labelling GMO products (called living modified organisms in the document), provisions for liability for environmental damage and advanced informed agreement for transboundary movements.

But the Miami Group (of major GM food exporters US, Canada and Argentina, plus Uruguay, Australia and Chile) scuttled the talks by refusing to include commodities (e.g. soya and corn) — therefore excluding the vast majority of GMOs that the protocol was in-

tended to cover. The Miami Group also sought a declaration to subordinate Biosafety Protocol rules to WTO agreements, thereby weakening them. With developing countries refusing to accept these conditions, the talks came to a standstill. Subsequent informal talks in September in Vienna also failed to advance.

Negotiations on the Biosafety Protocol will resume in January 2000 in Montreal. With the recent failure to introduce biotech as a trade discipline within the WTO at its November Ministerial meeting, renewed treaty talks on GMOs as an environmental concern will take place in a markedly different political context.

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Biosafety Protocol Secretariat website: [www.biodiv.org](http://www.biodiv.org)

## OECD: NGO Consultations on Biotech Guidelines

The Organisation of Economic Cooperation and Development (the 29-member bloc of industrialised countries) has two committees studying international guidelines: a Working Group on Harmonisation of Regulatory Oversight in Biotechnology, and a Task Force for the Safety of Novel Foods and Feeds. Both are preparing reports to be presented this year.

The OECD held a one-day consultation with NGOs in November 1999 to discuss consumer, environmental and agro concerns. A follow-up meeting will take place in Edinburgh in February 2000.

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OECD website: [www.oecd.org/subject/biotech/ngoconsultation.htm](http://www.oecd.org/subject/biotech/ngoconsultation.htm)

# Alliances and Agendas

## Consumer and Citizen Backlash

In this era of global trade, where protests move across borders as easily as products, outcry in Europe over US biotech exports has now boomeranged back to the Americas, over to Australia, Japan and beyond.

Rejection of GM foods is the most successful consumer revolt of recent memory, forcing changes in the marketplace, in food supply and production and empowering civil society. Citizens' movements have already had a far-reaching impact on trade in GMOs through their challenge to the corporate manipulation of safety regulations by governments.

The "foot soldiers" blocking the biotech advance are "the women and men who refused to buy their products — consumers, or citizens of global capitalism, voting in the only way they can," writes Maria Margaronis in *The Nation* (see page 28). "In the

European movement against GM food, Ralph Nader's old strategy of organising consumers at the point of consumption has found its best vindication yet."

Proponents of GM food technology have dismissed as "hysteria" the reluctance, especially in epicurean Europe, to swallow these Brave New Foods. But the Internet-linked assemblage of diverse social agendas that co-exist within the anti-biotech backlash consider food a common thread linking critiques of corporate control, agricultural industrialisation and loss of national sovereignty over trade and biodiversity.

"As consumer organisations," says Jayen Chellum of the Mauritius Consumer Institute, "the challenge for us is to look not only at GM food and labelling but along the entire production chain, seeking allies at every point." When that happens, consumers, not corporations, will determine what is being served on people's plates.

## People Power

**Uprooting Evil:** An underground group calling itself the "WTO Welcome Committee" destroyed several hundred GM fruit trees at a Canadian biotech firm on the eve of the World Trade Organisation meeting in Seattle. "Some say a tree should be judged by its fruit," the group stated in a communique. "In that case, GE should be cut down at the root."

**Port and Rail Blockades:** Greenpeace activists blockaded railway tracks from Mexico's Gulf Coast port of Veracruz in December in a bid to stop imports of GM corn from the US. Protesters chained themselves to the tracks and demanded that port officials show authorisation to transport the altered corn. Protesters fear that unregulated transport and storage of GM corn will contribute to "genetic pollution" of traditional corn varieties, which were first developed by Mesoamerican peasants here thousands of years ago.

**Vox Populi:** Austrians gave a resounding "No!" to genetic modification in an April 1997 referendum. One-fifth of the population voted against GM field trials and against patents on GMOs.

**Terminator Terminated:** Public pressure forced Monsanto to abandon plans to sell its Terminator Technology (see page 11). "Congratulations should go to the civil society organisations, farmers, scientists and governments all over the world who have waged highly effective anti-Terminator campaigns during the past 18 months," RAFI activists said. "It is a significant victory for farm and consumer organisations around the world to force Monsanto to publicly renounce first-strike use of this neutron bomb of GE agriculture."

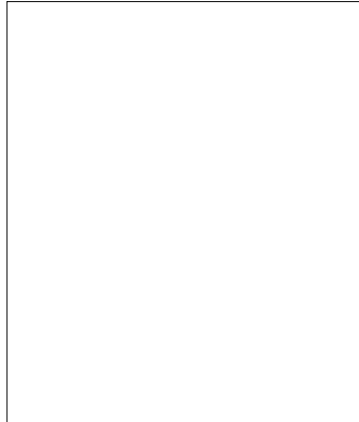
## Free of GE

**Hot Potato:** Following months of pressure from wary consumers, Canadian French fry giant McCain Foods will stop buying GM potatoes.

"We think genetically modified material is very good science (but) at the moment, very bad public relations," the company president told local media. "We've got too many people worried about eating the product. We're in the business of giving our customers what they want, not what we think they should have."

**Off the Shelves:** Major US baby food companies Gerber and Heinz have banned GM ingredients from their products. In the UK, food mega-companies Unilever and Nestlé gave in to consumer pressure and announced the phase-out of GM ingredients from their food products.

**Pas Encore:** Belgian sugar beet growers and sugar producers signed an agreement in November to produce "clean" GM-free sugar. "The consumer is not ready yet to accept GM sugar," a spokesman said.



Iceland Frozen Foods clearly labels its products for GM content.

ACA/CONSUMING INTEREST

**Nixed in Nippon:** In Japan, Kirin Brewery, Sapporo Breweries, Itochu Feed Mills, Nippon Flour Mills, Nissin, Fuji Oil Co. and the Japan Tofu Association, among others, have announced that they will ban GM ingredients or make major efforts to source and sell GM-free products.

**No Way, José:** Mexico's largest corn flour company, Maseca, will drop GM ingredients from its products. Mexico is the world's second largest buyer of US corn.

**Scottish Sleuths:** The Edinburgh Council will open a GM-detector lab to test for gene-altered food, the BBC reports. Scientists will check on products from the Scottish capital's cafes, shops and restaurants to see if they are complying with new rules that say foodstuffs containing GM products must be labelled.

The hope is that the unit will pay for itself by testing for private companies and other municipalities. Outlets found to be selling unmarked GM products could face stiff fines.

## Export Angst

**Chipping Away at Profits:** "The chips are down for Terra Prima — the tortilla chips," notes the *Hartford Courant*. The US maker of what was once Europe's most popular organic tortilla chip "received a shock last year when it found gene-altered corn in some of its chips. The organic farmer who supplied the corn was also taken aback. The company and the farmer believe that his organic corn was invaded by corn pollen from nearby fields growing GM corn." No longer able to sell them as organic, Terra Prima recalled 87,000 bags of its Apache chips. The incident has so far cost the small company US\$250,000.

"In theory, it sounds like a really cool thing," a company spokeswoman says of genetically engineered food. "But out in nature, nature happens."

**Fear on the Farm:** "Chaos in farm communities," said the headlines after giant US grain exporter Archer Daniels Midland announced it would not buy soybeans and corn co-mingled with GM varieties. Archer Daniels Midland purchases one-third of all corn, soybeans and wheat produced in the United States.

US farm groups are warning their members about the dangers of planting GM crops, saying the practice has become "so unpopular with consumers that farm-

ers are risking their livelihoods if they cultivate them again this year." newspapers report. Farmers were also warned that "inadequate testing of GE seeds could make them vulnerable to 'massive liability' from damage caused by genetic drift — the spreading of biologically modified pollens — and other environmental impacts."

**GE-Free Winners:** While almost no US corn or Canadian canola oil has been exported to the European Union for the past two years, GM-free Brazil is exporting record amounts of soybeans to the EU, the Campaign for Safe Food reports. And Australia is exporting increasing amounts of non-GM canola to Japan.

# Regional Roundup

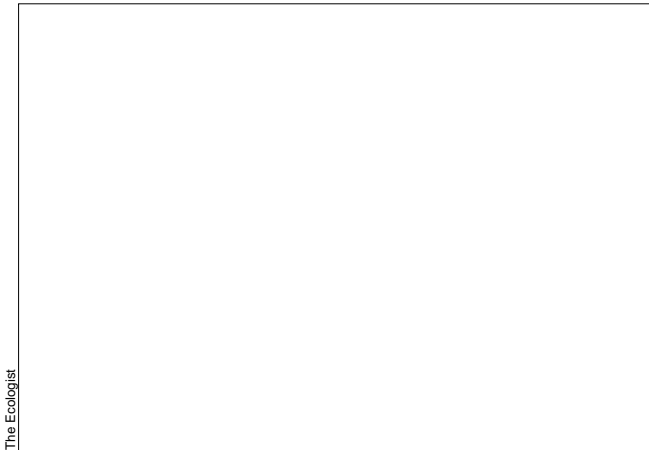
## Tasting Success

### Europe: Frankenfoods Boycott

Pressure from European consumers demanding regulation of GMOs has forced the European Union to suspend new approvals and introduce mandatory labelling.

While 18 GM products have already been authorised, a *de facto* ban on new GM approvals has been in effect since April 1998. Mandatory labelling of GM corn and soybeans went into effect in September 1998. Within the year, the EU's 15 member nations had agreed to further tighten requirements, risk assessments and time limits on GM approvals.

But it is European shoppers who have taken the lead, with their widespread refusal to purchase GM foods and cash-in-hand demands for GM-free alternatives. Top European retailers — including Sainsbury, Marks and Spencer, Carrefour and others — now operate a consortium to source GM-free products. In Austria, 90% of supermarkets declare themselves GM-free.



The Ecologist

The European boycott of “Frankenfoods” has sent shock waves along the food chain, obligating manufacturers to set up GM-free supply and production lines that extend from the foreign fields where Europe’s soya imports are grown to the local restaurants that dish out the final course.

Buoyed by this success, Greenpeace, Friends of the Earth and other groups have launched a “mopping up” campaign to drive

GM animal feeds off supermarket shelves. In September 1999, the EU rejected a proposal to require mandatory labelling of GM animal feeds, which are the principal market for GM crops worldwide.

*European Commission DCXXIV Consumer Policy and Health website: [www.europa.eu.int/comm/dg24/](http://www.europa.eu.int/comm/dg24/)*

### United States: Wake-Up Call

Biotech has blossomed in US fields, with roughly half the acreage in soya and corn planted in GM varieties.

In 1992, the US Food and Drug Administration ruled that no special labels on GM foods were needed, echoing biotech industry claims of substantial equivalency. The importance of this ruling transcends US borders, because FDA safety standards are often adopted as a model in other countries. In this case, Western Europe refused to follow suit.

By 1998, that decision brought the FDA a lawsuit from the Center for Food Safety, stating that the regulatory agency had ignored its own evidence of “undesirable effects” and run roughshod over consumer rights to safety, information and choice.

Meanwhile, as US shoppers watched Europeans rebel in the supermarket aisles, cracks in their complacency began to show. In September 1999, *Consumer Reports*, the most influential consumer magazine in the US, noted that, in a country where cartons of orange juice are labelled “from concentrate” and

vegetables in the freezer bins are labelled “frozen,” ignoring genetic modification “threatens to undermine public trust in a labelling system that millions rely on every day.”

Soon, mounting international pressure began to push open doors formerly closed to grassroots action. Draft legislation to require food companies to disclose GM ingredients was presented to the US Congress in November. One proposal features a rectangular label with “GENETICALLY ENGINEERED” in bold letters above the words “United States Government Notice”.

By year’s end, the FDA was showing signs of rethinking its position by inviting GM critics to air their views in a series of high-profile public hearings. Meanwhile, grassroots groups hope to repeat the European strategy of pressuring retailers, in order to counteract new lobbying offensives by biotech companies confident of their cosy relationship with government regulators and intent on continuing to call the shots.

*US Food and Drug Administration website: [www.fda.gov/oc/biotech/](http://www.fda.gov/oc/biotech/)*

## Asia and the Pacific: Ready for Rules

Public pressure is forcing governments to call for more stringent rules on GMOs. In Australia, New Zealand, South Korea and Japan, regulatory agencies have announced plans for mandatory labelling, although consumer groups find the proposals full of loopholes.

■ **Australia** and **New Zealand** health ministers recommended labelling in December 1998. A year later, the exact wording of the regulations was still being finalised.

■ In **Japan**, where GM soya, corn, canola, potatoes, cotton and tomatoes are on supermarket shelves, the government ruled in

August to implement labelling by April 2001. Japan is also hosting the first meeting of the new Codex working group on biotech foods, to be held in March. (See page 17.)

■ Farmer and consumer organisations in **India** are calling for an outright ban on GM crops and imports. In February 1999, India's Supreme Court banned field trials of GM cotton until rules for protection are implemented.

■ In May, the government of **Thailand** announced a ban on imports of GM seeds "pending clear scientific proof that they are safe."

## Africa: Public Relations and Protests

Biotech giant Monsanto "arrived in Africa before consumers got there," working with small farmers, providing free seeds, credit, hosting open field days and "giving a good PR spiel about the promise of GM seeds to eliminate food shortages," says CI regional food officer Auxilia Motsi. "As a result, many farmers don't see anything wrong with it."

At biotech seminars in **South Africa** and **Zimbabwe**, however, consumer groups expressed their anger at being left out of the debate. Small scale farmers are increasingly "unhappy at being fed PR info, fearing the Africa will become a testing ground and Africans will be used as guinea pigs," she adds.

A 1998 public relations campaign by Monsanto cited hunger in

Africa to persuade Europeans of the benefits of GM and drew rebuke: "We... strongly object that the image of the poor and hungry from our countries are being used by giant multinational corporations to push a technology that is neither safe, environmentally friendly nor economically beneficial to us," African delegates to the UN's FAO Commission on Genetic Resources protested.

"We do not believe that such companies or gene technologies will help our farmers to produce the food that is needed in the 21st century. On the contrary, we think it will destroy the diversity, the local knowledge and the sustainable agricultural systems that our farmers have developed for millennia and that it will thus undermine our capacity to feed ourselves."

## Latin America: Alternatives and Rhetoric

■ Brazil's **Rio Grande do Sul** state is launching what may be the world's first-ever crop substitution programme aimed at weeding out GM crops. Treating GM soybeans like drug plants, the state will offer farmers US\$5 million in low-interest loans if they rip out GM soy — illegal throughout Brazil — and replant normal varieties. "What we are telling them is that it's better to lose seedlings than lose their entire crop," said agriculture secretary José Hermeto Hoffmann.

■ The government of **Mexico** has proclaimed — on paper, if not in practice — that GM corn cannot be imported from the US. Mexico is the world centre for corn biodiversity. GM cotton and tomatoes are currently grown in Mexico.

■ In **Argentina** — the world's second largest producer of genetically modified soybeans — the government is beginning to reap criticism for its failure to increase regulation of GM crops and foods. Environmental groups have denounced the "heavy participation of industrial sector representatives" in the national Biosafety Commission, which advises the government on safety and environmental norms.

■ In **Chile**, the small consumer group ODECU is going to court to stop food companies from selling GM foods without adequate labelling.

# Consumer Politics

## Profiles in Pressure

### IDEC/Brazil

## Checkmate for Monsanto

One of the great David and Goliath fights of the GM battle is taking place in Brazil, where the consumer group IDEC, the Institute for Consumer Defence, and its allies have stopped the commercial planting of GM seeds in the second-biggest soya producer in the world.

In Brazil, where 25% of the world's soybeans are grown, a federal court ruled in June 1999 that Monsanto must present an environmental impact assessment before any genetically modified soya can be planted and sold commercially.

The verdict accepted IDEC's argument that Monsanto could not introduce its Roundup Ready soya seed in the absence of adequate regulations for safety and marketing, without environmental assessments and without informing consumers, through labelling, as required by law.

IDEC began to monitor developments in agricultural biotech as a member of Brazil's governmental Technical Biosafety Commission. However, when the commission refused to block Monsanto's application to plant Roundup Ready soya, IDEC resigned in protest and turned to the courts. In September 1998, it won a temporary restraining order against Monsanto, which the June ruling expanded.

The decision "stops Monsanto in its tracks," says IDEC president Marilena Lazzarini, because the environmental impact assessment will take at least two years. IDEC's innovative legal action to fight GMOs on the environmental front was carried out in tandem with Greenpeace and was seconded by Brazil's Ministry of Environment, causing a split in the government's position.

In the marketplace, Brazil's leading retail chain, the Carrefour subsidiary of the French supermarket group, has assured IDEC that "independent of (government policy) decisions, we are confident of our capacity to convince many enterprises to continue to cultivate non-GM soya" for export and domestic consumption.

IDEC, the largest consumer organisation in Brazil, leads the National Forum of Consumer Groups (FNECDC) and works closely with housewife associations, farmers and scientists. Its staff attributes their success to a "strong technical base," a top-notch set of advisory experts and unrelenting hard work.

In January 1999, the governor of the soya-producing region of Rio Grande do Sul announced that the state would stay GM-free. Saying "no" to Roundup Ready has brought economic advantages to Brazil, with exports of GM-free soybeans from Europe nearly doubling over the past year. (See pages 22 and 24).

The campaign slogan, "GM Foods: Don't Swallow That Stuff!", can be seen on T-shirts and leaflets in scores of public events and is an important element of IDEC's campaign strategy, described on page 29.

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## ACA/Australia Target the Market

"When the Australian Consumers' Association decided to tackle GM foods," executive director Louise Sylvan says, "we examined a number of the activist strategies from the environmental, human rights and consumer movements — particularly where there's been a global win. And we looked at the global debate over chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs, the ozone-depleting chemical compound used in refrigerators and other appliances) that culminated in the 1987 Montreal Protocol, still one of the better global environmental agreements.

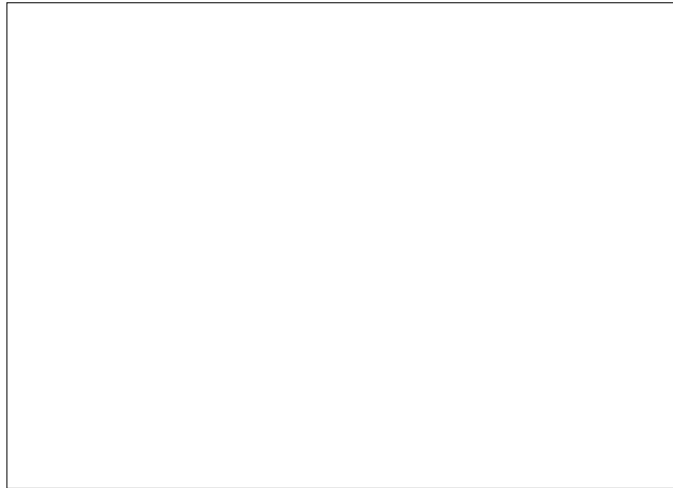
"What happened in the debate to limit the use of CFCs was that there was a powerful pro-limiting lobby in industry, so US business was split. Also, the US government had moved early on to put CFC-limiting laws into place nationally. So, at a global level, the environmental movement stumbled into an alliance with the US government and a part of US business. They took on the rest of the world, targeting the European Community first, and they won a global protocol. The key elements were a divided business lobby — no unified single voice — and a large group of scientists who were, if not aligned to the environmental movement, at least on its side in terms of desired outcome.

"In the GM labelling debate in Australia, we set about trying to split the business lobby and do what we could to bring the scientific community on board.

"With industry, we knew that the big food transnationals operating as the Australian Food Council were a lost cause. So we looked for a smaller Australian manufacturer of soy products, preferably one with commitments to good health and clean environment. What we wanted was negative labelling.

"We found one — the largest Australian soy milk producer — and persuaded it to break with the industry, from a totally self-interested point-of-view of giving themselves a competitive advantage in the marketplace. And we got a negative label: 'Does Not Contain Genetically Engineered Soy Beans or Soy Protein Isolate'.

"This was hard to achieve — lots of liaison and dialogue. But when the Food Council and transnationals went off the deep end, we knew we'd done the right strategic thing. Having this label at point-of-sale is a major public education strategy, too. But the main point was to have a firm in the marketplace



First Australian Consensus Conference, March 1999

differentiating itself on the basis of GM-free soy beans.

"The second part of our industry strategy was aimed at the retailers and we went unashamedly looking for a strategic alliance with them. The UK example showed us that retailers are more sympathetic to the consumer position than manufacturers. We organised a video conference and brought to the Australian retailers some UK retailers, the Dutch head of the food-retail-group lobby and government officials. We wanted them to know that there was legitimacy in breaking ranks with the

manufacturers. We lobbied them for two years. We kept getting rebuffed, but not with vehemence — they clearly wanted to talk.

"In late 1998, the first of the two big food retailers decided to require labelling from manufacturers. It's done its homework and sees no inherent problem in separating the production stream. It believes that separation to ensure labelling should become the industry standard.

"The other strategic step was to pull in the academic community with a Consensus Conference, where a panel of lay people interrogates the scientific community, industry, activists and the government on a public issue and delivers a verdict. The Australian Museum hosted the meeting in March 1999 and everybody — the government, the Commonwealth Scientific Research Organisation, some industry funders, farmers' groups — came on board.

"The Australian government has since made the decision that GMO labelling will be required — even before our strategy was completed! With this decision, the US government and US business support lose a key pillar. But even if this fails, we might get a solution in the marketplace under the leadership of the retailers.

"For consumers, I hope this is now going to be a win, a situation we did not even conceive could be possible two years ago."

— Louise Sylvan is Executive President of the Australia Consumers' Association and Vice President of Consumers International.

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## CUJ/Japan

# Rich Country, Hungry Future?

Yoko Tomiyama, of the Consumers Union of Japan (CUJ), says Japan may be the second richest country in the world but that the crisis over GM soybeans has forced the Japanese to realise how heavily dependent they are on foreign countries for their food.

"We welcome the GM food product crisis," she says. "It is time that more Japanese begin to think about how precarious our situation has become."

In October, CUJ sent a letter citing scientific data on potential health and environmental hazards of GM foodstuffs to US farmers, urging them to segregate GM and non-GM products exported to Japan. Most soybeans consumed in Japan come from the US.

Dependence on imports is the reason consumer groups have stopped short of calling for an immediate ban on GM soybeans. "If we called for a ban, we Japanese would have to forego an important part of our diet. Put it this way: we may be economically rich but we'd have to starve," she says.

However, Japanese companies are beginning to acknowledge consumer needs over business profits. A telling illustration of this change is the creation of separate sections in supermarkets — not required by law — separating products, like tofu and sauces made with imported GM soybeans, from those that claim to use only the local, non-GM variety.

But "financial gains and convenience could encourage Japan's farming community to take up biotechnology," which is heavily promoted by the government. "The only way we can fight this is to increase consumer awareness aimed at reducing the market for GM foods," says Tomiyama.

The CUJ's "No! GMOs" campaign delivered the signatures of 1,700,000 Japanese demanding greater regulation of GM foods to the government in May. The petition called for mandatory labelling, a moratorium on domestic production of GM crops and a halt to government-funded research on GM rice.

— From: "Japan: Furor over Gene-Altered Food Products," *Inter Press Service*, Oct. 14, 1999.

Chaz Davis/IOCU and GRAIN

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## CACPK/South Korea

# SOS for Information

"Experience is showing us that information is power," says Song Vo Kyung, of the Citizens' Alliance for Consumer Protection Korea (CACPK), a leader in South Koreans' push to regulate GM food imports and sales. "The CACPK gets information everyday over e-mail from consumer groups in the US and elsewhere. We base our campaigns on that information. We need to be part of umbrella organisations, to work together."

CACPK has garnered important support for its GM labelling drive from other citizens' groups. In 1998, students and environmentalists occupied a government-funded biotech greenhouse, tied themselves to the entrance and hung banners demanding an immediate ban on cultivation and imports of GM foods. But scientific and academic associations have not followed suit.

CACPK doesn't reject GMOs outright: "We respect technology," says Song. "We are interested in increased productivity, but we need guarantees of safety."

Responding to public pressure, South Korea's Agriculture Ministry has announced that mandatory labelling of GM corn and soya will be implemented by mid-2001.

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## CA/United Kingdom Purchasing Power

Sheila McKechnie, of the UK's Consumers' Association (CA), gleefully delivers this progress report: "Consumers gave Monsanto a bloody nose."

"We're exercising new muscle," she adds, as if spoiling for a fight. "If governments don't understand that, let Monsanto be a lesson. What we did to Monsanto, we'll do again."

Virtually all UK retailers and major food manufacturers are now committed to removing GM ingredients from their foods. Yet 10 years ago, when the first GM additive (a baker's yeast) was approved for use in British food, it was "swallowed without qualms," writes Maria Margaronis in *The Nation*. "The trouble started in 1996 when the American Soybean Association, Monsanto and US trade associations told British food retailers that they could not — would not — segregate American GM soybeans from the conventional kind, undermining the golden rule of consumer-friendly capitalism: Let them have choice."

In the US, the FDA had accepted the biotech industry's claim of substantial equivalency. In the UK, decisions were being put to scientific committees. Consumers were being ignored. "But consumer common sense is more sensitive," says Sheila McKechnie, "and consumers were saying: 'Sorry, this is not an issue for science to decide. We have as much right to decide as you do.'"

So the Consumers' Association set about building alliances. And the one that gave first fruits was the consumer alliance with supermarkets and food producers. "If you don't label,' we told them, 'consumers won't shop.' And then we sat down with them to agree to what European labelling should be."

Meanwhile, an extraordinary coalition — from gourmet chefs to development activists to gardeners with pruning shears— added their voices to the outcry. The GM fight has "increased the legitimacy of consultations at ground level," says McKechnie, and "raised the status of consumer organisations. Consumers want more than before. They want more information and a greater say, and they are using their purchasing power to get it."

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Which? March 1999/CA

## How Biotech Backfired in Britain

"The arrogance with which US biotech firms approached the European food industry is the stuff of legend. Bill Wadsworth, of the frozen-food chain Iceland, recalls a 1997 meeting at which a biotech executive said: 'You should just accept this is right for your customers.' A few weeks later, Wadsworth was on a plane to Brazil, in search of non-GM soybeans to supply Iceland's processed foods.

"Iceland began to raise the issue's profile with its customers, pointing out that while Iceland's foods were GM free, those of the other supermarkets were contaminated. Before long, every supermarket chain in the country was inundated with mail and phone calls about GM food and had begun to follow suit.

"Meanwhile, the field testing of GM crops in Britain by Monsanto, Novartis and other companies gave a dramatic focus to the environmental arguments against genetic modification. Media-savvy eco-activists in decontamination suits or grim reaper outfits began to pull up trial plantings and leaflet supermarkets. By the summer of 1998, hardly a week went by without reports of some new, inventive, nonviolent protest."

— From "As Biotech Frankenfoods Are Stuffed Down Their Throats, Consumers Rebel," by Maria Margaronis, *The Nation*, December 1999. See full article on website: [www.thenation.com](http://www.thenation.com)