

How GMO Lobbyists Taught Me “We’re Helping the Poor and Hungry”

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GMO promoters enthuse about how GM crops will be able to help the poor and hungry, far in the future, writes Claire Robinson. But they are silent about the currently-planted GM crops – 99% of them herbicide-tolerant or insecticidal. Could it be because opponents of the technology are being proved right at every turn?

Insofar as reason and science are concerned, the GMO industry has lost. All they have is golden rice and gene editing. But they don’t even have those. Both have thus far failed to live up to their promises and are kept afloat largely by wishful thinking.

Over the course of 2015, I became convinced we’re winning the GMO debate.

And paradoxically, what convinced me was the experience of facing off against pro-GMO lobbyists in person and in print.

What did they say to convince me? Here’s a quick guide.

1. Everyone hates Monsanto



Dr. Shanta Karki studies rice plants being grown at IRRI’s Biotech labs, which have worked on the development of Golden Rice. From the image collection of the International Rice Research Institute (IRRI) on Flickr (CC BY-NC-SA).

In Europe at least, even the most die-hard promoters of GMOs refuse to defend Monsanto and claim to despise the company. Even Vivian Moses, chairman of the industry-funded pro-GMO information service [Cropgen](#), [writing today](#) on how the “*biotech industry is winning the war*” on GMOs, concedes that

Monsanto was cast as the [prime villain](#) for seeking to import GM soya into Europe ... Certainly the industry remains unpopular in some quarters: Monsanto in particular is still seen by activist protesters as a large and visible target.

So, the GMO enthusiasts say, we should forget about Monsanto and embrace ‘public good’ GMOs instead. The problem with that is in the real world it is Monsanto that is the dominant force in the marketplace.

In any case it makes little difference whether it’s Monsanto or a public research institution that owns the patent on a GMO. The profit motive rules either way and takes precedence over issues of public health, the environment, and scientific integrity.

Through intellectual property mechanisms, the public research institutions that develop GMOs effectively become [indistinguishable in their behaviour from corporations](#). We are treated to the unedifying spectacle – already common – of scientists and academics acting as salespeople.

2. Don’t mention the GM crops we actually grow

[Over 99% of all GMOs grown worldwide](#) are engineered to survive being sprayed with herbicides or to express an insecticide. Opponents of GM crops often speak about the fact that these GM crops are failing under the weight of [herbicide-resistant superweeds](#) and [Bt toxin-resistant pests](#).

They talk about the rapid decline of the monarch butterfly due to its main food plant being [wiped out by the Roundup herbicide](#) sprayed on GM crop fields. They point out that [Roundup stands accused](#) of causing birth defects and cancer in Argentine people and of being a ‘[probable](#)’ human carcinogen.

They even show the uninspiring vision of what’s in the GMO commercialization pipeline: GM crops that tolerate being sprayed with even more herbicides – and potentially more toxic ones at that.

They can talk about all these things. But it will be a one-sided conversation. Because in spite of the ubiquity of these GM crops in those countries that have adopted GMOs, GMO promoters don’t want to talk about them. At all.

3. Talk a lot about golden rice and gene editing

What GMO promoters do want to talk about is:

- GMO golden rice, which they say will save poor people from vitamin A deficiency, and
- Gene editing, which they say will save GM technology from its old problems of imprecision and unpredictability – problems that until now they have always

sought to deny!

What do these two hopes for the GMO future have in common? Mostly that they are about future promise, not actual delivery. GMO golden rice has been beset by basic R&D problems and [disappointing yields in field trials](#).

And gene editing has not so far proved the revolution in precision that has been claimed. The [limited research](#) that has been carried out shows [numerous off-target effects](#).

In fact, [public interest scientists say](#) new GM techniques like gene editing [give rise to GMOs](#) that must be labeled under European law.

But [GMO promoters insist](#) that the products of gene editing must not be classified as GMOs. Their reasoning is not scientific. It is geared to ensuring that these products will dodge regulation and avoid being stigmatized in the marketplace.

The take-home lesson is that this technology is too fragile to survive the transparency that's increasingly being demanded by consumers.

4. Don't ask too many questions about golden rice or gene editing

When it's pointed out that GM golden rice still isn't ready to use despite swallowing tens of millions in research funding, and that experiments show gene editing isn't yet precise or predictable, GMO promoters have no answers. They don't reply with contradictory evidence. Neither do they admit they're wrong. They merely say, "*Research must continue.*"

Meanwhile, the Philippines has gone a long way towards [solving its vitamin A deficiency](#) problem without GMOs. Undoubtedly the problem would be completely solved if a fraction of the funding wasted on trying to genetically engineer beta-carotene (vitamin A precursor) into rice had been spent on techniques that are already proving effective at combatting malnutrition.

And non-GM breeding continues to [outstrip GM](#) in supplying safe, nutritious, and high-performing crops that thrive in a wide variety of conditions. That's despite the fact that GM keeps being pushed at the expense of approaches that we already know work!

5. Don't mention two of the most prominent GMO lobbyists

GMO lobbyist and climate science denier [Patrick Moore made history](#) last year by getting caught on camera telling a journalist he'd be happy to drink a glass of Monsanto's Roundup herbicide - and then running away when the journalist offered him a glass.

If you're not impressed, you're not alone. Since his refusal to walk the pro-GMO talk and his irresponsible promotion of a toxic herbicide as a beverage, other GMO promoters have started to view Moore as an embarrassment and a no-go topic for discussion.

Likewise with Kevin Folta, a pro-GMO scientist with a massive social media presence who [made the fatal error](#) of not telling the truth about his links to the industry. Folta retains a circle of [vicious online defenders](#). But people who have attended public meetings where he has appeared tell us that he has lost credibility even among GMO supporters.

It looks as if these formerly high-profile pro-GMO spokespeople are now being airbrushed from history.

‘Forward-looking statements’ and broken promises

Our conclusion about the state of the GMO debate from studying the best arguments that the GMO lobby can muster is this. Insofar as reason and science are concerned, they’ve lost. All they have is golden rice and gene editing.

But they don’t even have those. Both have thus far failed to live up to their promises and are kept afloat largely by [wishful thinking and ‘forward-looking statements’](#), as Monsanto likes to call them.

In countries like the UK that have pro-GMO governments, forward-looking whimsy, fuelled by the promise of profits from intellectual property rights on GMOs, may be enough to keep the research funding pipeline flowing for a few years. But that pipeline is running counter to the mainstream. The global rejection of GM foods is growing.

The US government was the first to embrace GMOs – but American consumers are rejecting them in droves. In 2014, non-GMO foods and beverages [generated \\$200 billion](#) in sales and the total global market for non-GMO products is predicted to almost double by 2019. And Campbell’s, the world’s largest soup company, has just announced that it will [label GMO ingredients in its products](#) in the interests of transparency.

The two countries other than the US that grow the most GMOs are facing a public health crisis. In Argentina, 30,000 doctors and health professionals have [demanded a ban on glyphosate](#), the herbicide that over 80% of GM crops are grown with.

In Brazil, after the WHO’s classification of glyphosate as a ‘probable carcinogen’, the national cancer institute blamed GM crops for placing the country in the top ranking globally for pesticide consumption and called for a [massive shift to agroecological farming](#).

Meanwhile, two-thirds of European countries, including all parts of the UK other than England, [have rejected those GM crops](#) already in the approvals pipeline.

[GM Bt cotton in India](#) and [Pakistan](#) is increasingly in meltdown. In the Philippines, a Supreme Court ruling has put a [stop to GMO field trials and approvals](#). Since the Philippines is the country targeted for GM golden rice, one of the GMO lobby’s great hopes for the future now faces an extra obstacle.

The GMO food venture appears to be at death’s door – unless gene edited foods are exempted from labelling. If they are, these ‘hidden GMOs’ could lead to a collapse of consumer confidence in the food market as a whole.

Is the food industry willing to take a bullet for the GMO industry? Probably not – but citizens will have to make a lot of noise to ensure that this attempted deception doesn’t succeed.

So when it comes to [Vivian Moses’s claim today](#) that “*Supermarket opposition has softened in the UK*” and that “*much of the European public has become bored with the issue*”, it’s up to us to prove him wrong.

Claire Robinson is an editor at [GMWatch](#).

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