

Public-sector scientists: a smoke screen?

Beware of scientists bearing claims of neutrality, warns Antje Lorch. A growing number of boffins are willing to speak up in defence of GM products, while industry figures lurk in the background

'In order to effect the desired changes in public perceptions and attitudes, the bioindustry must stop trying to be their own advocates.'

This advice, given to the biotech industry by the leading PR company Burson-Marsteller in 1997, is still valid more than a decade later – and it's as simple as it is clever: get a friendly, seemingly solid, seemingly neutral intermediary to speak for you. It was given to EuropaBio, Monsanto and other companies after Monsanto's attempt to introduce GM soy beans on to the European market resulted in a PR fiasco. Farmers and consumers did not want to be bullied into buying GM products, and they did not believe Monsanto's arguments. Consumers too were aware that, first and foremost, companies want to sell products, not to save the world. None was willing to believe a multinational chemical company when it argued that its products would reduce agrochemical use and feed the poor.

Years later, it seems that the biotech industry is still taking this advice to heart. So, who is speaking for the industry these days?

The Public Research and Regulation Initiative (PRRI) was established in 2004, its stated aim to involve 'the public-research sector in regulations relevant to the development and applications of biotechnology'. As such, delegations of approximately 40 PRRI members took part in the conference of the Convention on Biodiversity and the Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety in 2006 and 2008 (for comparison's sake, delegations from developing countries often only consist of one to three people).

These delegates argued against regulations for genetic engineering, against a ban of terminator crops and for research on GM trees. Their general reasoning was that, on the one hand, too much regulation would hit the public sector even more than big companies, and on the other hand, the policymakers should trust that, as scientists, they knew what they were doing, because they were working for public research institutions (the implication being that such institutions, by definition, would not be compromised by industry and profit motives).

The power behind the science

At first glance, the PRRI looks like a group of scientists that might finally bring some reason into a world where arguments for and against GM crops seem to be polarised between Monsanto and NGOs. Finally, an independent group that knows what it is talking about and that just wants the best for the public. Finally, a source of expert knowledge for policymakers to rely upon.

A closer look reveals that this is true neither for the organisation nor for at least some of its members.

The PRRI has approximately 250 members worldwide. It receives €600,000 funding from the EU for its project 'Global involvement of public research scientists in regulations of biosafety and agricultural biotechnology' (Science4BioReg). The project seeks to influence international and regional agreements, particularly the Biosafety Protocol, EC directives and regulations and the Aarhus Convention.

The list of financial supporters goes far beyond this, however. It includes the US and Canadian governments, lobby organisations such as the International Service for the Acquisition of Agri-biotech Applications (ISAAA), and industry organisations such as CropLife International and the US Grain Council – all of which have stated an interest in having less regulation over the development and trading of GM crops.

'The implication is that public research institutions would not be compromised by industry and profit'

Some of the PRRI's most prominent members also have obvious ties to industry. PRRI founder Willy de Greef was the head of regulatory affairs for Syngenta until 2002. He has also been a key player in the Global Industry Coalition, which represents the biotech industry during the Biodiversity and Biosafety Meetings. He left the PRRI in April 2008 to become the new secretary-general of EuropaBio.

Other members include Marc van Montagu, president of the European Federation of Biotechnology; Klaus Ammann, well-known pro-biotechnology fighter; Gerard Barry, former research director at Monsanto and now, among other positions held, head of the Intellectual Property Unit of the International Rice Research Institute (IRRI) and Coordinator of the Golden Rice Network; Steven Strauss, director of a US research group on GM trees whose funders include ArborGen, the world's biggest forest biotech company; and Florence Wambugu, former Monsanto scientist, director of the Africa centre of ISAAA and known for her involvement in the failed project to develop GM sweet potatoes.

Of course, Burson-Marsteller's advice to the biotech industry was not entirely new. The cigarette industry had its friendly scientists, in the same way as petrol companies now have scientists to plead the case against climate change. The lesson for those of us viewing the GM debate from the outside is this: where big profits are at stake, think twice about where the information you are getting is coming from.

With GM crops, however, this might be much more difficult, as quite a few scientists mix their scientific work with a strong, emotional belief that biotechnology is the right way to go. Nevertheless, journalists have a duty to be aware of such links with regards to the people they rely upon for expert views and quotes. And the general public has a duty to be at least a little sceptical about attempts to persuade them that debate is all about the science and not about the marketplace.

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