

Worthwhile Gene Mission Lobbyism In Life Sciences: A Case Study

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No doubts, no hesitating: Green genetic engineering offers "major opportunities for the developing countries". Food from approved gene plants is "safe for humans and animals", they represent "no danger for the environment". Rather it is "irresponsible, the way the very sceptical attitude of the Europeans reflects on the developing countries". Farmers and governments world-wide do not cultivate genetically changed plants because they "fear, their products will not be able to be sold in Europe". Result: "governments and NGOs" should stop their "campaigns against green genetic engineering".

These sentences are not taken from a press release of a manufacturer of genetically changed seeds. They originate from the pen of a working group of the Union of the German Academies of Sciences, the union of the eight honourable German science academies - from Bavaria, Berlin-Brandenburg, Göttingen, Heidelberg, Leipzig, North Rhine-Westphalia, Mainz and recently also Hamburg.

"Green genetic engineering" is the central topic of interest in the Newsletter dated 02-2006 of the Academic Union. Six articles carry inscriptions on how "campaigns against the green genetic engineering is without scientific basis", "less chemistry in the field" and "genetic research should not be obstructed." In the centre of the publication is a statement of thirteen scientists from nine countries about green genetic engineering in developing countries. It is the communiqué of a meeting in the spring of 2006 in Berlin. Originally it was to have been adopted in December 2006 in Egypt by the "Inter-Academy panel", a world-wide union of ninety-four science academies. But, to the disappointment of the German Academic Union, the resolution was shifted to autumn 2007. The member academies can still change the paper.

The consultation needs to be extensive. If one looks at the list of the signatories, it quickly emerges why the statement does not report that the risks of green genetic engineering are also scientifically disputed. At the end of the paper are names known for decades as industrial lobbyists. Only a minority of the signatories are active in research. Two thirds are emeritus scientists or full-time representatives of institutions with names such as AfricaBio, Egypt Biotechnology Information Centre or CropGen. These organisations are not engaged in scientific research but are sponsored by biotech companies such as DuPont, Bayer, Monsanto or Syngenta for the purpose of international PR.

Thus, the Indian Kameswara Rao is one of the signatories of the Academic Union's paper. In the western industrialized countries, an alliance of "eco-imperialists" and conventional seeds industry cooperate, announces Rao over the InterNet side of its Foundation for Biotechnology Awareness and Education in Bangalore. The European "anti-tec lobby" is responsible for the "hunger and the death of millions of poor people".

Martin Chrispeels, San Diego, another signatory, is quoted with approval in publications of the American agrarian company Monsanto. Chrispeels argues against

the "myths" of organic farming and instead praises genetic engineering. "Most myths, which are spread by environmental organizations, have been disproved years ago", says another signatory, the Swiss Emeritus Professor Klaus Ammann, former director of the Botanical Garden in Berne. What the newsletter conceals is that he sits on the advisory committee of GenSuisse, an institution financed by Novartis, Roche, Serono and other biotech companies, to clarify genetic engineering to the Swiss public.

In this country, one campaigner for green genetic engineering is also one of the four German signatories: Klaus-Dieter Jany, full-time director of the Molecular Biological Centre at the Federal Research Institute for Nutrition in Karlsruhe. In the year 2000, Jany founded the scientific group "Green Genetic Engineering e.V"., to promote "dialogue between society, science and the users of green genetic engineering". In the mid-1990s, the 63-year old biologist collaborated with a subsidiary of the seed manufacturer Monsanto on genetically modified "Roundup-Ready" soybeans, at that time highly disputed. An essay by him on "Novel Food - Safety Assessment" appears in the list of Monsanto publications for the year 2003. In 1996 Jany reviewed textual material for the company on request but without remuneration. He received only lecture fees from the GM seeds manufacturer which also occasionally accommodated a graduate student in their enterprise.

"Today you no longer find scientists without good contacts with industry. That is also encouraged politically," With those words Myriam Hönig of the Union of the German Academies of Sciences defended to this newspaper the selection of the experts.

Now there are well-known scientists who, from an uncommitted standpoint, examine the technology of green genetic engineering: for instance the biologist Beatriz Tappeser of the Federal Office for Nature Protection or Volker Beusmann, genetic engineering expert of the University of Hamburg. There is also the team around Armin Grunwald (Technical University of Karlsruhe), directors of the Office for Technology Assessment of the German Federal Parliament which is working on a study to "Transgenic seeds in developing countries", all of whom were ignored - just like the scientific consultants of the development organizations Misereor and FIAN which view the deployment of green genetic engineering in developing countries with scepticism.

An emeritus professor was responsible for the composition of the participants at the Berlin workshop: the former Göttingen chemistry professor Hans-Walter Heldt. He contributed to the genetic engineering emphasis of the Newsletters in an article which emphasizes the "unbelievable success history" of green genetic engineering. From a "global view" it is "not very important" if German farmers do not make use the benefits of the new strains and if they are rejected by consumers. He regrets only that much of German science suffers as a result. "The sorrow I feel for the these developments is my motive for involvement in this activity. I have never received funding from the industry" Heldt averred. Asked whether it is not unfortunate in view of the expressed requirement to obtain an assessment from "independent" experts that so many signatories of the Academy paper were connected with the industry, said Heldt in reply to this newspaper: "if one wants international cooperation in t his field, one cannot know always everything about the background of those involved."

The German science academies should be aware of the fact that Heldt has a certain inclination bring together experts who think as he does. As early as 2002, Gerhard

Thews, at that time publisher of the " Akademie-Journals " of the Academy Union, warned in a editorial that Heldt had invited no critics of the new technology to a workshop on green genetic engineering. Thews publicised in the minutes that Heldt had in mind a "subsequent symposium" at which ethical considerations and independent analyses of the economic interests in this sector should also be considered. "No such a meeting ever took place", Heldt admits today. "There were other things to do, and anyway I am chemist. Perhaps I am also not the right person for that."

The Mainz Academy of Science and Literature, a member of the union, does not for the time being want to take a position on the content of the genetic engineering paper. But the managing director Carlo Servatius is clear: "in Mainz, positions with respect to future questions of the society - such as genetic engineering - always involve extensive discussions process and state different opinions."

Something similar is fortunately demanded in a brochure of the Berlin-Brandenburg Academy of Sciences. It documents the guidelines for scientific analyses in the political sphere which the chief scientific advisor to the British government compiled. These guidelines demand that the selection of experts should reflect the variety of opinion in a topic like green genetic engineering - this topic is expressly named in the brochure: "Potential ethical controversies should be delivered openly. Not only "industry and civil society" but also science have often a "polarising, openly interest-led view of the subject".

The chief of the press office of the Academic Union already quoted stressed that British scientists also considered green genetic engineering safe: "the British representative at our Workshop pleaded for even sharper formulations in the draft for the statement in favour of green genetic engineering." Now also this British representative is not a blank sheet: Vivian Moses, who retired from his chair in 1993, nevertheless in the year 2000 received £460,000 from the British biotech industry for leading of the PR agency CropGen. Also this commitment of a signatory is not mentioned in press release of the Academy Union.

The president of the Berlin-Brandenburg Academy, Günter Stock, merely takes a position with respect to the whole procedure only personally. "A funded position presupposes that all arguments are brought in, not only selective ones, and that the sources are transparent and comprehensible", said Stock, whose personal record always prominently calls attention to his earlier work for the Schering AG. "I personally would plead for the American practice of the disclosure of the interests and hope that this is also practised in the future in Germany."

Belgian, American Scientists Share Wolf Prize In Agriculture

- Crop Biotech Update, isaaa.org

The latest winners of the Wolf Prize for Agriculture are Ronald Phillips and Michel Georges for their groundbreaking discoveries in genetics and genomics. Wolf Prizes are being awarded since 1978 by the not for profit Wolf Foundation in Israel, to individuals with outstanding contribution to agriculture, arts, chemistry, mathematics,

medicine and physics.

Philips is affiliated with the University of Minnesota, USA. He was cited to be the first to generate whole corn plants from cells grown in culture. This subsequently helped in accelerating genetic modification of corn. Georges on the other hand, is with the University of Liège, Belgium. He is credited on developing tools and methods that helped in the identification and mapping of genes that affect economically important traits in livestock. These genes include those responsible for milk yield, fertility, and disease resistance.

The complete announcement can be found at

http://www.wolffund.org.il/cat.asp?id=14&cat_title=AGRICULTURE