

Massive influence of biotech industry on EU research projects on risks of genetically engineered plants

Report shows close networking between experts and industry

9 November 2015 / The results from the EU research project GRACE are to be presented in Potsdam, Germany on 9 and 10 November. The GRACE team of experts conducted feeding trials with genetically engineered plants on rats and reviewed existing publications on risk research. Testbiotech analysis shows the biotech industry has seriously impacted the results of the research project. As a Testbiotech report published today also shows, the biotech industry has not only systematically influenced the GRACE research project, but four other similar EU research projects. All of the coordinators of these projects are part of a close network of institutions that are funded by industry.

Even specialised consultancy groups such as PERSEUS and GENIUS which have biotech industries as their clients, are directly involved in the GRACE research project. For example, the Belgian company PERSEUS that just recently approached the German government on behalf of a US biotech company about allowing the cultivation of oilseed rape derived from new methods of genetic engineering, is organising communication services for GRACE.

“The documented networks existing between EU research projects and industry cannot simply be regarded as coincidental. Just a handful of experts all organised in the same networks are dominating publicly funded risk research on genetically engineered plants”, Christoph Then concludes for Testbiotech. “We expect the EU Commission to remedy this situation. We need new ways of selecting experts and projects to facilitate risk research that is independent of industry.”

Currently, around 60 events of genetically engineered plants have been assessed and authorised for import into the EU. Many of these plants were never tested in feeding trials for potential health risks.

“The discussion about the possible carcinogenic effects of red meat may help in understanding the complexity of the questions at stake. Contrary to the risk assessment of chemically defined substances with potential toxicity, such effects can only be detected after data has been gathered from a large number of people over a longer period of time”, Christoph Then explains for Testbiotech, “These questions shows some strong similarities to those that are decisive for the risk assessment of genetically engineered plants.”

In 2016, the EU Commission will be making a decision on further standards of risk assessment for genetically engineered plants. The Commission will be referring to the outcome of the GRACE project. Testbiotech is warning that there is a substantial risk that the EU Commission will come to false conclusions, and could fail to set sufficiently robust standards to maintain the precautionary approach as required by EU regulations.

In the light of the many open questions and uncertainties in risk assessment, Testbiotech recommends stopping further authorisations of genetically engineered plants. If market authorisations are continued as at present, then risk assessment needs to be thoroughly re-organised and higher standards implemented to comply with the precautionary principle, which is the underlying basis of EU regulations.

Furthermore, Testbiotech is calling for full transparency in the selection processes for research projects such as GRACE, as well as the independent and critical analysis of the experts who are chosen and the outcome of the projects.

In addition, Testbiotech is calling for a systematic approach to promoting risk research that is independent of the interests of the biotech industry. To achieve this goal, stakeholders such as environmental and consumer organisations should be involved in the selection processes of risk research projects from the beginning and not only after the projects have started.

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New Testbiotech report: www.testbiotech.org/en/node/1436

The GRACE project: <http://www.grace-fp7.eu/>

Previous Testbiotech reports on GRACE: www.testbiotech.org/node/785
<http://www.testbiotech.org/en/node/1130>

Correspondence between the PERSEUS Consulting Group and the German Authorities:
www.testbiotech.org/node/1414