



Media Release

Regulatory decisions on releasing genetically modified (GM) insects biased by corporate interests

London/ Munich Thursday 8th November 2012 A briefing published today by public interest groups highlights how regulatory decisions on GM insects in Europe and around the world are being biased by corporate interests (1).

The briefing shows how UK biotech company Oxitec has infiltrated decision-making processes around the world. The company has close links to the multinational pesticide and seed company, Syngenta. Oxitec has already made large-scale open releases of GM mosquitoes in the Cayman Islands, Malaysia and Brazil and is developing GM agricultural pests, jointly with Syngenta. Plans to commercialise GM insects would result in many millions of GM insects being released in fields of crops, including olives, tomatoes, citrus fruits, cabbages and cotton. In future, any insect species might be genetically modified.

The European Food Safety Authority (EFSA) is highlighted as one of several examples showing how industry organises its influence. In EFSA's GM insects working group, which was established to develop guidance for risk assessment of genetically engineered insects, there are several cases of conflicts of interest, including experts with links to Oxitec who only partially declared their interests. The draft Guidance on risk assessment of GM insects shows some significant deficiencies: for example it does not consider the impacts of GM insects on the food chain. Oxitec's GM insects are genetically engineered to die mostly at the larval stage so dead GM larvae will enter the food chain inside food crops such as olives, cabbages and tomatoes. Living GM insects could also be transported on crops to other farms or different countries. EFSA has excluded any consideration of these important issues from its draft guidance. Many other issues are not properly addressed.

The briefing also highlights problems with a World Health Organisation (WHO)-funded project which has allowed the company to bypass requirements for informed consent for the release of GM mosquitoes. The WHO-funded Mosquito project, which was supposed to be developing best practice, also allowed the company to gain approval from Brazilian regulators to release 16 million GM mosquitoes before draft regulations on the release of GM insects had been finalised or adopted, without publishing a risk assessment.

Dr Helen Wallace, Director of GeneWatch UK said *"The public will be shocked to learn that GM insects can be released into the environment without any proper oversight. Conflicts-of-interest should be removed from all decision-making processes to ensure the public have a proper say about these plans."*

Christoph Then, Executive Director, Testbiotech, said: *"Risk assessment of genetically engineered animals touches many areas where there is lack of knowledge. We are*

concerned that EFSA will apply a biased and selective protocol to safety without really sorting out potential hazards."

François Meienberg, Berne Declaration, said: *"Companies such as Syngenta and Oxitec have to learn that negative impacts on the environment or health can arise from their lobbying activities. To act responsibly they have to change their lobbying behaviour immediately."*

Nina Holland, Corporate Europe Observatory (CEO), said: *"Experts on EFSA's working groups should not be allowed to have any conflict of interests with industry, let alone ties with companies producing the very product they are assessing - in this case GM insects. This clearly shows that EFSA's rules to deal with conflicts of interest still have major gaps."*

Tina Goethe, SwissAid, said: *"The development of GM-insects for agriculture implies unforeseeable risks for human health and environment. In order to meet the challenges of small scale agriculture in poor countries, we do not need expensive and high risk technologies, but agro-ecological solutions."*

The briefing highlights multiple attempts by Oxitec to influence regulation around the world, which have included:

- Attempts to define 'biological containment' of the insects (which are programmed to die at the larval stage) as contained use, by-passing requirements for risk assessments and consultation on decisions to release GM insects into the environment;
- Attempts to avoid any regulation of GM agricultural pests on crops which will end up in the food chain;
- Avoidance of any discussion of how GM insects can be contained at a site, or products produced using GM insects can be labelled;
- Exclusion of many important issues from risk assessments, including impacts of surviving GM mosquitoes on the environment and health, and impacts of changing mosquito populations on human immunity and disease;
- Failure to follow transboundary notification processes for exports of GM insects correctly;
- Undermining the requirement to obtain informed consent for experiments involving insect species which transmit disease;
- Attempts to avoid liability for any harm if anything goes wrong;
- Pushing ahead with large-scale open releases of GM mosquitoes before relevant guidance or regulations are adopted.

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Notes for Editors:

- (1) Genetically modified insects: under whose control? GeneWatch UK, Testbiotech, SwissAid, Berne Declaration, Corporate Europe Observatory briefing. October 2012.
<http://www.testbiotech.de/node/729>