

NGOs usually considered trustworthy, but often not when it comes to GMOs

Non-profits are usually considered trustworthy, especially compared to corporations and governments. But when it comes to genetically modified foods, they don't always stick to the truth. In an [article](#) in The Guardian—a newspaper known for its traditional hostility toward GMOs—journalist Marc Gunther investigates some claims made by liberal advocacy NGOs critical of crop biotechnology that do not stand up to scrutiny.

In an [accompanying background blog](#), Gunther posts email correspondence with several key sources including Consumers Union senior scientist Michael Hansen, Stonyfield Organic chairman Gary Hirshberg and nonprofit Biology Fortified director Karl Haro von Mogel.

In the original Guardian article, Gunther writes:

Who, after all, are you going to believe: Monsanto, one of [the most hated companies on the planet](#), or [Friends of the Earth](#)? When the [Center for Food Safety](#) warns of the dangers of genetically modified salmon, which it calls “Frankenfish,” retailers and restaurants pay attention – even if the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) says it's safe to eat. And if we turn to the widely admired Consumer Reports for its ratings of cars and refrigerators, why not follow the advice of its parent company, [Consumers Union](#), which [warns of the dangers of biotech food?](#)

The reason is that advocacy groups – no matter what the issue – are not immune to pressures like other social institutions, as we'll explain below. So at the very least, the arguments of NGOs should be subjected to the skepticism and fact-checking that is brought to bear on the claims made by business or government. And it turns out that two of the main NGO arguments around GMOs just don't hold up to scrutiny.

Gunther dives into two commonly-cited arguments against GMOs: that GMOs are unhealthy and that the research on GMOs cannot be trusted. On the background blog post, Gunther explains how his reporting began:

The story began when I read a long and detailed commentary by [L. Val Giddings](#), a senior fellow at the Information Technology and Innovation Foundation, a consultant to the biotech industry and a former government regulator, critiquing 2013 testimony by Michael Hansen of Consumers Union to the New York state legislature. The claims in the testimony have been repeated elsewhere by Hansen, and I was struck by how many of them did not appear, to me, to stand up to scrutiny by Giddings. [You can read Giddings' commentary here](#) (pdf).

On GMO safety, Gunther finds that the government, scientific organizations and America's doctors endorse the safety of GMOs, contrary to what NGOs claim:

The question is, where is the evidence that indicates that the GMOs on the market are unsafe? Are they any riskier than the food you buy at the grocery store, a farmer's market or a restaurant? The fact is, hundreds of studies have been unable to identify any health risks posed by foods containing biotech crops, according to the industry and the FDA, which says that GMOs on the market are safe to eat. ...

If you choose not to believe the industry, the government or a respected scientific journal, consider what America's doctors, through the American Medical Association (AMA), say about biotech crops and human health: "Bioengineered foods have been consumed for close to 20 years, and during that time, no overt consequences on human health have been reported and/or substantiated in the peer-reviewed literature."

And on the trustworthiness of GMO research, Gunther finds evidence that there is a large body of research funded by governments around the world on GMOs independent of industry:

The European Commission spent more than 200m euros of public funds on GMO research between 2001 and 2010. The EU summarizes about 50 studies in this [264-page report](#), which is easily found online. I tried to politely point this out in a comment on Hirshberg's Just Label It blog, but my comment was not approved for publication. The blog has been shared more than 2,000 times on Facebook, spreading misinformation. Hirshberg has told me by email that he stands by the claim. ...

Karl Haro von Mogel, who is compiling a database of GMO studies at the website [Biofortified](#), says he has read and catalogued about 400 studies, more than a third of which are independently funded. He couldn't say how many of the independent studies were performed in the US, but notes that "a study on MON 810 maize done outside the US is still a study done on MON 810 maize".

From the email correspondence available on the background blog post, Hansen defends his position that no GMO research is truly independent because the biotechnology industry's permission is needed to obtain the seeds:

As for my statement that "we have no independent safety testing of these crops in the US because of intellectual property rights concerns," I stand by that statement as well. I was talking about the situation in the US and was not referring to work conducted in other countries. I don't think I gave the impression that all the studies are done by industry. My point was that studies in the US cannot be undertaken without industry's permission because the seeds are their intellectual property. Thus, no studies are entirely independent.

Gunther asked von Mogel to respond to Hansen's claims:

Dr. Hansen's statement is more nuanced. He's not talking about funding sources, but whether the researchers are 'truly' independent, which he does not define in this quote, but suggests what this means later in the testimony. He believes that all (or "virtually" all) of the research on genetically engineered crops is published only with the permission of the biotech companies that make them. He bases his claim on a 2009 Scientific American article concerning entomologists who wrote an open letter to the biotech companies saying that they had difficulty accessing genetically engineered seeds for research purposes, but completely omits the follow-ups to that article. It turns out that scientists at universities were already able to conduct independent research on GMO products (and many didn't know), and the companies themselves entered into agreements affirming the same thing. One of the things they can research under these agreements is the end-use of the crop, such as feeding it to animals and the effects thereof. The only thing they seem to want in return is notice about the study when you go to publish it, which is a professional courtesy in any field (and that you don't save or pirate the seeds). ...

I have myself sent an email to Monsanto asking about the possibility of getting seeds for a little independent experiment involving our blog's readers, and the representative was open to providing them. I haven't formally requested any yet, so I can't say that they would give them to me without restrictions on publication, but if they do or don't it would make for an interesting blog post either way. But the point is this: access to these seeds for research purposes is possible.

Gunther concludes with the argument that "better arguments" around GMOs are needed to answer legitimate concerns like monoculture and intellectual property issues, and that the claims made by NGOs should not be accepted at face value:

Let's be clear. None of this is to suggest that there aren't legitimate reasons to oppose GMOs. There are. The industry's track record of managing biotech crops does not inspire confidence: On at least two occasions, biotech crops – [corn in one case](#) and rice in another – that were not approved for human consumption inadvertently found their way into the food system.

GMOs, so far, have enabled homogenized monocultures more than crop diversity. The patenting of genes raises intellectual property issues. And the benefits of GMOS have been oversold by the industry: they haven't, so far, done much to feed the hungry.

That's why we need a [rational debate about GMOs](#), one that's based on science and not scare-mongering. Like any new technology, biotech agriculture brings with it risks and benefits. Both are real. But there's little doubt that genetic engineering could turn out to a valuable technology that, if properly managed, could help to deliver abundant, affordable, sustainable and healthy food to many millions of people.

For consumers of information, though, the more important point is this: Be skeptical about the

claims of NGOs, whether we're talking about GMOs or anything else. After all, non-profits and the people who lead them are subject to the same temptations, pressures and incentives that drive companies: They are self-interested. They seek attention in a noisy marketplace. And they rely on the financial support of donors, just as companies depend on customers.

Read the full, original article: [Why NGOs can't be trusted on GMOs](#)

Read the background blog: [A deeper dive into NGO's claims on biotech foods](#)

Additional Resources:

- [Media manipulation by anti-GM scientists and NGOs](#), Knight Science Journalism Tracker
- ['Agent Orange Corn': NGOs skirt science, liken Dow's new seed to Vietnam era pesticide](#), Genetic Literacy Project