

Cornell Alliance students challenge ‘anti-GMO bullies’ over FOI demand

The [Cornell Alliance for Science](#)—a global initiative for science-based communications based at Cornell University—has launched a symbolic petition to support biotechnology research scientists in the face of recent attacks on their integrity. These attacks come from an organization called [U.S. Right to Know](#), which recently submitted Freedom of Information requests demanding that public scientists turn over tens of thousands of emails linked to their research efforts involving biotech crops.

“We taxpayers deserve to know the details about when our taxpayer-paid employees front for private corporations and their slick PR firms,” [said](#) Gary Ruskin, executive director of U.S. Right to Know. “This is especially true when they do work for unsavory entities such as Ketchum, which has been implicated in espionage against nonprofit organizations.”

The federal Freedom of Information Act ([FOIA](#)) website defines “a law that gives you the right to access information from the federal government. It is often described as the law that keeps citizens in the know about their government.” FOIA is a crucial tool in maintaining an open and transparent government.

Yet lately, open records laws like FOIA have been exploited to bully researchers, taint reputations, and hinder valuable work. This has been especially true in the controversy over climate change. In its recent “Freedom to Bully” [report](#), the Union of Concerned Scientists noted that prior to the internet age, conversations between scientists primarily occurred via phone or face-to-face. Now, email forges a permanent record, and requests for this information harm the privacy that scientists once enjoyed. The Concerned Scientists believe that “[t]his can have a chilling effect on the frank exchange of ideas and constructive criticism, a crucial part of the scientific process.”

As research geneticist Karl Haro von Mogel [explained](#) in *Biology Fortified*:

This is troubling news for academic scientists. An organization called “US Right to Know” has issued at least a dozen legal requests to the home universities of public scientists who have made efforts to educate the public about genetically engineered crops. Using the US Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) and state laws, they want access to all of the emails sent to and from the targeted scientists and a list of industry and industry-associated organizations. Claiming to only be interested to “understand the dynamics between the agrichemical industry’s PR efforts, and the public university faculty who sometimes are its public face”, these FOIA requests risk violating academic freedom and having a silencing effect on scientist-communicators who fear becoming political targets.

As [Climategate](#) demonstrated, taking emails out of context can cause misunderstanding at best, and enable intentional distortion at worst. USRTK’s demands imply insincere intentions, suggested Keith Kloor, who [reported](#) in *Science*:

Kevin Folta, a biologist and biotech researcher at the University of Florida in Gainesville, would

like to comply. But he anticipates trouble. “Unfortunately, when you skim through the 70,000 e-mails I have ... [USRTK] will find opportunities to pull out a sentence and use it against me,” he predicts. “They will show I have 200 e-mails from big ag companies. While it is former students ... or chitchat about someone’s kids, it won’t matter. They’ll report, ‘Kevin Folta had 200 emails with Monsanto and Syngenta,’ as a way to smear me.”

The intentions of USRTK and activists aligned with it were on display in a video broadcast posted late last month on The Weekly Women’s GMO Free News (WWGFN). Kathleen Hallal and co-host Esther Grondahl interview Stacy Malkan (co-founder of USRTK) and Zen Honeycutt (founder of anti-GMO group Moms Across America).

They began by questioning Kevin Folta’s affiliations, wondering how he possibly has time for his social media science advocacy unless he’s being paid off by “PR firms funded by Monsanto.” They go on to imply that Folta is a social media impostor, assuming fabricated identities and spreading pro-GMO rhetoric. The thirty-five minute episode, which can be viewed [here](#), demonstrates the tendency for leaders of anti-GMO organizations to believe in and propagate conspiracy theories.

Like other science supporters, I’ve [criticized](#) Moms Across America’s far-fetched claims that Americans are falling victim to toxic levels of glyphosate, an herbicide often paired with GM herbicide resistant crops. [Glyphosate](#), originally developed as a water softener, is one of the mildest chemicals in use in agriculture today, according to the EPA and the European Commission. To support its agenda, MAA [urged](#) readers to send urine and water samples to a lab it contracted with, Microbe Inotech to conduct what it claimed were “scientific tests” that it was sure would ‘prove’ that glyphosate is linked to a host of health issues, including the increase in autism. In fact, there were no controls and no scientifically meaningful data was produced. Zen Honeycutt even went so far as stating that mental illness is skyrocketing due to glyphosate use—a contention explicitly rejected by the mainstream science community.

Like school-aged mean girls, these crusaders play the role of concerned, benevolent citizens but they actually head up advocacy groups that harass legitimate scientists and science without empirical evidence to back up their campaigns. In a response to their campaigns, the Cornell Alliance for Science wrote a letter supporting the fourteen scientists targeted by the FOIA attacks. With more than one thousand supporters’ signatures displayed to date, this online petition of support reads,

Dear Science 14:

To the 14 public sector scientists who are being harassed by agenda-driven, anti-science FOIA requests, I stand with you.

This is a tactic taken directly from the climate deniers’ handbook: to mislead the public on an issue of clear scientific consensus with personal communications taken out of context.

You were targeted because of your engagement with the public on key scientific issues and I don’t want your voice to be silenced. This is the latest step in a broader anti-science campaign

that is hurting our society.

The Freedom of Information Act is essential for a healthy democracy, but this request is not in the public interest. This request is clearly a witch-hunt by an anti-science organization with the goal of chilling academic discourse.

I stand with the 14 targeted scientists and urge them to stand up for academic freedom and the protection of scientific discourse.

I urge you to stay strong in the face of anti-science bullying and not compromise your important work.

The petition is still accepting signatures here to show solidarity with the Science 14.

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Additional Resources:

- [Kevin Folta on Biogate: It's a 'gotcha' taxpayer-funded fishing expedition](#)
- [Organic food can cure autism caused by GMOs? More 'quack science' from Dr. Oz](#)