

Kevin Folta discusses “ties” to GMO industry, challenges of biotech literacy communication

U.S. Right to Know, an anti-GMO group funded almost entirely by the Organic Consumers Association and the activist wing of the organic community, has sent out freedom of information requests targeting at least 40 professors and others associated with universities (including Jon Entine with the Genetic Literacy Project) that the group believes may have links to the agriculture industry.

Directly in the crosshairs of USRTK is [Kevin Folta](#), head of the horticultural sciences department at the University of Florida. Last week, Keith Kloor writing in *Nature*, [reviewed](#) copies of the emails supplied by the university under the state FOIA request. According to Kloor:

The records, which the university gave to U.S Right to Know last month, do not suggest scientific misconduct or wrongdoing by Folta. But they do reveal his close ties to the agriculture giant Monsanto, of St Louis, Missouri, and other biotechnology-industry interests.

“Nobody ever told me what to say,” says Folta, who considers public outreach to be a key part of his job (and who informed *Nature* of the document release). “There’s nothing I have ever said or done that is not consistent with the science.”

In response to the analysis of some of his emails, Folta posted an [appeal](#) on his Talking Biotech website to support his science communication outreach efforts.

This program is not yet grant funded, so it is 100% dependent upon external contributions.

Our sponsors understand the value of an informed electorate, and a stronger communications outreach strategy, enabling farmers, dietitians, physicians and scientists to fairly represent the peer-reviewed literature in public discussion.

Folta also took to [Reddit](#) to engage on the broad issue of biotechnology, communication and industry ties. Folta:

In February of 2015, fourteen public scientists were mandated to turn over personal emails to US Right to Know, an activist organization funded by interests opposed to biotechnology. They are using public records requests because they feel corporations control scientists that are active in science communication, and wish to build supporting evidence. The sweep has now expanded to 40 public scientists. I was the first scientist to fully comply, releasing hundreds of emails comprising >5000 pages.

Within these documents were private discussions with students, friends and individuals from corporations, including discussion of corporate support of my science communication outreach

program. These companies have never sponsored my research, and sponsors never directed or manipulated the content of these programs. They only shared my goal for expanding science literacy.

I am a public scientist that has dedicated thousands of hours of my own time to teaching the public about science. As this situation has raised questions the AMA platform allows me to answer them.

Here are some key highlights of the public discussion, which can be reviewed in full [here](#).

Given the impact of this have you seen a chilling effect on your colleagues communications?

It is absolutely clear how this has changed things. People call me rather than email...we're talking little seed companies, fruit growers, you name it. They don't want their names, companies, questions to be out in public. Their competitors can FOIA me to find out what they are thinking.

I know that no young scientist will ever enter into public discourse around any controversial topic in my state. If you dare work in GMO policy, surveys or research... if you work on climate or sea level rise... if you work in fertilizers or pesticides... if you work in any area with an activist push-back— you're going to be dragged through the mud for your life's work.

Dr. Folta could please correct me, but all public employees, including professors, are subject to the state's "sunshine laws"?

Yes, [Florida's] Sunshine Laws are the most open in the world. That's good. The problem is that it allows activists like USRTK to obtain all of my records and use them in bad ways, like constructing narratives that are not true. That is happening already. Plus, who among us has not had a bad day and used a four-letter word or commented on someone? These things will be public, will be broadcast tied to me, and will be used to harm my reputation or have me removed from academic research. I see it coming. I don't think that's fair. I'm glad to be transparent, but when transparency is used to harm innocent people with contrived narratives, that's bad. Already the "close ties to Monsanto" line is coming back to haunt me, and my ties to them are very few. That's a real problem, and permanent reputation damage for an independent scientist.

Science funding in academic labs can sometimes be a mishmash of multiple funding sources, including private foundations, public grants, and corporate contacts. Do you have any ability to distinguish which projects fall under the public work versus the privately funded work?

The attacks come because I freely speak about transgenic (GMO) crops and speak from a

100% scientific, evidence-based platform. I teach people how to effectively talk about science, especially farmers, dietitians and scientists. You can see why the anti-GMO movement would not like this.

So their goal is to silence me by generating these massive records requests and assembling narratives that are not true—but impeach my integrity.

I have to release EVERYTHING. There are cases where deleting is allowed, but I don't do that. So if I'm cc'd on any correspondence, even stuff I don't want, it is in my record. Go ahead, email me "Cosby's tricks to landing the ladies" and that will end up in activist hands, even if I don't open it.

It looks like they are trying to argue that there is no place for corporations in academic research. So, I guess I will ask about what you think a reasonable corporate role should be?

Should there be zero connections between corporate/industrial interests and university research? Should it be limited to sponsored professorships (where the company gives the university money to pay for the salary and maybe lab startup funds, but has no control over who is hired or what they do). Should corporate research grants be allowed, which lets them push for specific directions of research, but not control the results or what is published? Or should there be full scale collaboration projects between academic and industrial researchers? What limits should there be?

Please visit The New Reddit Journal of Science for the complete [transcript](#) of Folta's public Q and A.