# Biotech researchers concerned FOIA requests could chill public outreach

Publicly funded researchers have become integrated into public relations and lobbying efforts by both agricultural biotechnology and organic companies, according to a report in the New York Times. The report is based on emails between researchers and companies obtained through freedom of information act (FOIA) requests. Previously an article in Nature reported on FOIA requests for the emails of scientists made by the activist group US Right To Know, who oppose genetically engineered crops.

To shed light on how FOIA requests are impacting the public engagement activities of scientists, the Genetic Expert News Service — GENeS — asked for comments from researchers who have received FOIA requests; researchers who are known for their communications activities but who have not received FOIA requests; and social scientists who study the communications environment around agricultural biotechnology.

NOTE: What follows are excerpts. For the full transcript of the comments, visit the GENeS site here.

**Dr. Jason Delborne, Associate Professor of Science, Policy, and Society, North Carolina State University (webpage):**

> Recent reports of emails revealing relationships between university scientists and corporate interests surrounding agricultural biotechnology are likely to create discomfort among faculty who are unaccustomed to thinking of themselves as conducting their professional communication (especially emails) in public view.
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> Critique of 'balanced reporting' on climate change is now a well-known phenomenon, and it is important for journalism to bring the same rigor to the issue of public researchers aligning their work with private interests in the realm of agricultural biotechnology.
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> With increasing emphasis on 'broader impacts' of publicly-funded research – especially outreach and education – it is perhaps sensible to consider the influence that corporate funding has on researchers' activities – not solely as producers of knowledge – but as communicators (i.e., when they engage the public in ways that relate to their expertise). It would be tragic if the FOIA requests chilled the enthusiasm of researchers to engage with the public, but my hope is that the controversy over the FOIA requests will spark further dialogue about how researchers at public universities can increase their sensitivity to differences between public and private agendas in science communication.
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> From my point of view, there is little sense in hoping – or demanding – that scientific researchers remain unaffiliated or disconnected from 'interested parties' – whether they be corporations, activist groups, or professional societies. Instead, we should aim for greater transparency.

**Dr. Paul Vincelli, Extension Professor and Provost's Distinguished Service Professor, University of Kentucky (webpage):**

> I think there is a chilling effect from FOIA requests made to scientists. Every time I write something on social media, I worry if I am "sticking my head up" and making myself a target for a FOIA. I am 100% behind transparency: I believe we university professors are doing the people's work and so we are therefore accountable to the public.
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> Most scientists will not venture into public discussion of controversial topics in which they are an expert, because of the tremendous potential for ad hominem attacks. And these attacks are commonly engendered or made worse by the emails obtained through a FOIA request. This is not to mention the lost time from work the scientist is passionate about and that can contribute to the public good. I sometimes wonder if I will regret the outreach I am doing on GMO crops. Talk to me when I receive my first FOIA (we'll see how I feel then) but for now, I see silence as unacceptable, because so much of the science on GMOs is misrepresented.
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> I think private funding should be acknowledged in a disclosure statement, which has become the norm for many journals. It is perfectly valid to seek private funding when funding rates for major granting agencies (NSF, NIH, etc.) have fallen tremendously. It only makes sense for researchers to look for any source of funding – whether from chemical companies, fertilizer manufacturers, organic farming organizations, etc – that will help them test valid and important hypotheses. Report the funding in a disclosure statement, but I want to see the research and I would be a fool to immediately disqualify a paper that may have been partially or fully funded by industry on that basis alone.

**Dr. Alison Van Eenennaam, Animal Geneticist in the Department of Animal Science at the University of California, Davis (webpage):**

> I work with many different groups and industries in my job. My position description states I am to 'Establish linkages and interact with the diverse animal industries of the state of California include the emerging animal biotechnology industry… and provide subject matter assistance in genomics and biotechnology with a major emphasis on agriculture and use of products resulting from biotechnology.
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> Every single producer I interact with owns a business and so is part of the 'agriculture industry'. The FOIA requests only ask for the subset of my email that deals with the plant biotechnology industry. More than 99% of my email correspondence was with other clientele, students, and groups, but that won't be evident because of the targeted nature of these requests.

I give around 100 presentations to groups across the nation annually including a variety of scientific societies, commodity groups representing farmers using conventional and alternative production systems, activist groups and public interest groups. Typically, but not always, these groups pay my travel expenses to come and speak at their meetings. If a meeting involves a flight, unless the group pays travel expenses I would not be able to go.

Public sector scientists typically draw on a number of sources to help cover expenses (like speaker travel costs, room rentals and audio visual equipment) including registration fees, public grants, and sometimes donations or sponsorships from private companies that have an interest in the topic. Indeed, many public conference grants require that industry match the public funds. This is true whether the topic is something controversial like biotechnology, or something non-controversial like drought management.

Scientists who are teaching the scientific consensus around GMO safety are not heretics or paid mouthpieces; they are simply reiterating the opinion of every major scientific society in the world.

**Mikel Shybut, PhD Student, Department of Plant & Microbial Biology, University of California, Berkeley, *Member of Communication, Literacy & Education for Agricultural Research (CLEAR) group (webpage):***

As a young scientist interested in improving science communication and outreach to the public, it's scary to see some of the best and most effective communicators being targeted.

I believe in open science and good journalism and am hopeful that the release of these documents will lead to a broader discussion of the important role of public/private collaborations in science. There are many legitimate questions that arise pertaining to funding distinctions and conflicts of interest and this provides an opportunity to discuss them. I think both scientists and the public would benefit from such a discussion.

There's a reason scientists support genetic engineering as a tool and it's not because Dr. Folta received funding for outreach and education. Whether tackling drought or flooding, disease or pests, heat stress or frost, there are tangible solutions that genetic engineering can provide that will help some people. This is not either/or or us vs. them or some vast corporate conspiracy, this is science at it's best trying to find solutions to contribute to a sustainable future.

What worries me is the fear. There's a lot of nuance free, categorical fear spread about GMOs and the recent focus on public university scientists and the personal attacks on Dr. Folta on social media are certainly intimidating. But if we can potentially save citrus by using a gene from spinach or reintroduce a blight-ridden American chestnut tree in its fully immune glory, isn't that information worth communicating? I think so.

**Read the complete posting by GENeS here.**