

## Scientist for hire? Does anti-neonic activist David Goulson produce pre-determined 'research' for funders?

One of the ironic, unintended consequences of the ongoing attack campaign by the anti-GMO group [U.S. Right to Know](#)—an organization launched with a [\\$134,500](#) grant from the Organic Consumers Association [Read GLP profile of USRTK [here](#)], and with an announced purpose of “exposing” independent university professors for helping to develop and publicly communicate about biotech crops—is that it’s shone a harsh light on the [organic industry](#) (see: OCA, Just Label It, Stonyfield Organic) and activist [journalists](#) (see: Michael Pollan, Tom Philpott).

Freedom of Information requests initiated first by USRTK have uncovered a [plethora of documentation](#) showing how anti-GMO groups coordinate their messaging, often working with pro-organic scientists who have shown a willingness to deliver studies supporting the industry that funds them while dissing biotechnology research.

The prototypical scientist-for-hire in the good and agriculture debate is [Charles Benbrook](#), an agricultural economist who churned out numerous “independent” studies, funded in whole or in part by the organic industry, that have been widely cited to support claims of the nutritional superiority of organic foods and the supposed collateral damage caused by GMO-linked agriculture. He was subsequently pushed out by Washington State University after his connections, which he did not disclose on numerous submissions to academic journals, was revealed. He now works as an organic food lobbyist and activist. [Read GLP Biotech Gallery profile on Benbrook [here](#)].

But when it comes to the debate over pesticides and bees—and particularly the role of a class of pesticides known as neonicotinoids, which some scientists and many activists believe may be a major driver of bee health issues—David Goulson stands alone.

### **British biologist targets neonics**

University of Sussex biology professor David Goulson has become a well-quoted source for journalists reporting on the controversy over neonicotinoids. Neonics, as they are often called, are a class of agricultural insecticides, often coated on seeds, introduced in the 1990s that replaced chemicals that as a side effect were highly toxic to beneficial insects like bees and also to farm workers.

Neonics are considered very effective by farmers and were welcomed by entomologists when they were first introduced. But they have become embroiled in a dispute in recent years—part science and part political—over whether they are a driving stressor for bees and a key contributor to the 2006 outbreak of Colony Collapse Disorder. The CCD link has since been challenged and rejected by a slew of research. Overall, globally and in regions deploying bees in agriculture, honey bee numbers are steady or growing, well above the numbers that existed before the introduction of neonics. Still stressors on bees, including wild bees and other pollinators, exist and are of concern to farmers, regulators, activists and the public.

This is where Goulson comes in. The evolution, behavior and environment professor, along-time well

known figure in anti-pesticide activist circles, has made a career of pointing to neonics as the primary culprit for bumble bee problems—and he has extended his concern to include honey bees. His work stands in contrast to a plethora of more recent real world and field realistic studies have forged a consensus in the entomology community that neonics plays a minor role, if any, in honey bee health. [Read GLP's [Beepocalypse Myth Handbook](#)]

That has not dampened Goulson's enthusiasm for promoting his high profile role as the face of the anti-neonic advocacy community. For almost six years now, whenever the subject of pesticides has arisen, Goulson has injected himself into the discussion, ready to provide a friendly quote to journalists, reporting a one-off study claiming one pesticide or another is killing bees or doing unspeakable harm to the planet.

That such quotations are very helpful to campaigning advocacy groups is no coincidence, as European journalist David Zaruk uncovered in a recent investigative piece, and other stories on Goulson. Zaruk has revealed how a group of academics (many not involved in bee research), including Goulson, calling themselves the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), created a sub group to look at the impact of neonics on honey bees. The IUCN Taskforce on Systemic Pesticides arranged to publish low-grade academic research that purportedly documented the dangers of neonics. Goulson was a [vocal member of this task force](#) and actively promoted its conclusions—conclusions contradicted by field studies.

As Zaruk has reported:

Goulson had used the perceived crisis of the decline of pollinators to campaign (with the IUCN Taskforce) for a ban on neonicotinoids. When the data showed that there was no actual decline in honeybee levels (and any increase in bee mortality was linked to other factors like cold winters), Goulson stepped forward with his research on the effects of neonics on bumble bees. Now this research has proven questionable, for many logistical and methodological reasons, so we now see Goulson looking for the effects of this class of pesticides on cats ... yes, cats.

### **Cat man?**

Cats? Here is the background. The British campaign group [38 Degrees](#)—so named for the angle at which an avalanche begins—has over the years carefully cultivated scientists who are willing to go the extra mile and participate directly in anti-pesticide activist research. The group explained its strategy in [a recent email newsletter](#) about its belief that pesticides, approved as safe and used in home gardens, are actually killer products:

There's one way to find out if that's true: investigate! Experts from the University of Sussex have a plan to find out the truth. They'll do the science. And once we have the facts, we can run a huge campaign to get these products off shop shelves and out of our gardens until they're safe.

As noted previously, the funding of any research by so-called special interests—industry or anti-industry NGOs—is not itself automatically cause for concern. The more important issues are total transparency and whether the researchers launch the study with a predetermined conclusion. So the fact that 38 Degrees had reached out to Goulson and agreed to coordinate the funding of his research on cat litter pesticide contamination is not itself in question.

But there is more to the story. In a podcast called [Talking Naturally](#), Goulson discussed the 38 Degrees fundraising campaign seeking to ban the use of neonicotinoids (also known as neonics) in products designed to keep fleas off family dogs and cats.

“The money they raise if they are successful and go ahead is going to fund us to do some research in the first instance,” Goulson has said.

Sounds reasonable enough if the work is truly independent. But Goulson, perhaps unintentionally, revealed that independent research is not on his agenda. He said that the research money would pay for a post-doctoral fellow to complete a study that the activists could use for political ends going forward. Most damaging to his claims of being an independent scientist, he said that there is likely a contamination of neonicotinoids in the environment from pet flea treatment. In other words, he has already settled on a conclusion.

That’s a scientifically bizarre claim, as there has never been a study to substantiate what he claims, before embarking on his study, is a fact. Here is where Goulson clearly crossed an ethical red line; this is where Goulson comes across as a hired gun. The conclusions of scientific studies should never be concocted behind closed doors, in advance of actual research, or by self-interested individuals or groups. But that’s exactly what appears to be happening. Anti-pesticide campaigners are organizing crowd funding of Goulson’s work, and the professor has agreed to turn out a study with a conclusion that he has already publicly announced.

Such a conclusion would be a great boon for anti-chemical activists and 38 Degrees in particular. Here is how the scheme appears to work. 38 Degrees launches a campaign complete with scary headlines that generate enough buzz to get donations flowing; in this case, the group claims flea treatments are dangerous and neonics are the source of the danger. The money that comes in feeds researchers like Goulson, who appear willing to commit to putting out studies with pre-determined conclusions (that also comport with their prior public statements). 38 Degrees is then poised to launch political lobbying based on the “independent” study. That generates more headlines, more money for 38 Degrees, more prominence (and perhaps future research money) for Goulson—and the wheel turns again.

How objective could Goulson’s research be when the activists have already printed the fliers, the fundraising letters and other materials for the campaign, before the research has even begun? The outcome appears predetermined, which is something that has no place in science.

### **Reflecting on Goulson’s work with IUCN**

This is not the first time Goulson has been involved in scientific endeavors in which the conclusion

appeared foregone. Consider [his work](#) on the IUCN. The European Union funded the IUCN to produce studies upon which it could explain its decision to ban the use of neonics. Reporter Zaruk was first to reveal IUCN's conclusions were predetermined. He found an internal IUCN strategy document that had inadvertently been posted online. It was quite explicit about the researchers commitment to generate a set of scientific studies and an overview paper they hoped to publish in *Science* that would work together to advance a predetermined goal:

The most urgent thing is to obtain the necessary policy change to have these pesticides banned, not to start a campaign. A stronger scientific basis for the campaign will hopefully mean a shorter campaign. In any case, this is going to take time, because the chemical industry will throw millions into a lobbying exercise.

It appears that many of the IUCN task force members did not appear to be interested in waiting for the results of the scientific studies. The findings were to be coordinated from the beginning, to ensure none of them would “undermine” the overall goal of banning neonicotinoids.

In order to prepare for the paper to be submitted to *Science* it is necessary to plan it simultaneously with the first four more detailed papers (to be sure that the first four papers do not unintentionally undermine the proposed high-impact one). A small meeting is therefore needed to do the necessary planning including the authors of the first four papers...

Independent scientists aren't supposed to meet with public relations professionals to plan the coordination of the results of experiments that have not yet been carried out—but that's exactly what the IUCN appeared to have done here. The *Science* overview article was to be crafted to have the greatest PR impact.

If we are successful in getting these two papers published, there will be enormous impact, and a campaign led by [World Wildlife Federation], etc could be launched right away. It will be much harder for politicians to ignore a research paper and a Policy Forum paper in *Science*.

This plotting and scheming by Goulson and others came to be known as Beegate. It demonstrated the questionable credibility at the IUCN, which refused to disavow the panel's work. Nonetheless, the activists at 38 Degrees have shown no shame in adopting IUCN-style tactics, in effect using Beegate as a guide. What is so disheartening for those who respect the process of independent science is that David Goulson himself is on record discrediting research funded by “special interests.”

Science is about following the data wherever they take you. What appears to be going on here is scientists who come up with a conclusion before commencing their research, then cherry-pick evidence to support it, often conspiring to place their “findings” in low grade journals to which they can buy access, and then profit from that exercise. That's not science; it's ideology and politics.

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