

## Worst 10 list: Advocacy groups that put ideology ahead of science on food and farming issues

*[Editor's note: This is one part of GLP's two-part series examining organizations that place ideology ahead of science in addressing genetics. The companion piece focuses on human genetics, and can be found [here](#).]*

Many non-government organizations aim to inform the public, policymakers and scientists about a wide range of complex and important issues. But there are times when science takes a backseat to ideology. Perhaps nowhere is this more common than in the volatile landscape surrounding genetically modified foods and modern agriculture. Criticism of GMOs, and everything connected to them, has given rise to a host of organizations pushing messages that often lack scientific support. Here are 10 NGOs that often abandon the science behind genetic modification of food in favor of such ideology.

### Center for Food Safety

Known as the 'legal SWAT team for the anti-GMO industry, the 15-year-old [Center For Food Safety](#), a [logely](#) not-for-profit based in Washington, D.C., is headed by Andrew Kimbrell, a lawyer who was trained by anti-technology activist Jeremy Rifkin. The organization receives more than \$3 million in donations annually and is closely tied to the organic food industry.

CFS unabashedly promotes and defends organic-only agriculture, and opposes GMOs, food irradiation, aquaculture, animal cloning and rBGH. It was one of the earliest adopters of a later debunked theory that mad cow disease was exclusively the result of non-organic livestock agriculture. CFS was the primary instigator of legal skirmishes over GMO sugar beets; it also organized opposition to GMOs in Hawaii and has aggressively backed GMO-labeling campaigns. It works closely with global anti-GMO activist Vandana Shiva, and offers her office space in Washington.

CFS has filed dozens of suits, often in partnership with [EarthJustice](#) and other activist organizations, targeting various U.S. government agencies. It filed a joint suit with [Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility](#) (PEER) against the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service seeking to ban GMO crops from 25 national wildlife refuges.

The organization's website contains its own news stories and other content promoting organic food, while ignoring scientific support for using genetic engineering in agriculture. The group also claims there are no pre-market safety tests for GM food, and supports labeling of GM foods. It argues that the government's "failure to require testing or labeling of GE foods has made millions of consumers into guinea pigs." The group also argues that, "Existing regulations that identify GE crops and food ingredients as "Generally Regarded As Safe" use an outdated process with minimal testing requirements that rely on companies to self-evaluate the safety of their products."

Read the [Genetic Literacy Project profile](#) and [Activists Facts review](#).

## **Environmental working group logo**

## **Environmental Working Group** Image not found or type unknown

The [Environmental Working Group](#), based in Washington, D.C., has been operating as a non-profit since 1992. It advocates the adoption of organic food and opposes genetic engineering and farm subsidies.

The organization, which received more than \$6 million in donations last year, issues reports that raise fears of toxins or other chemicals in consumer products (as well as in genetically modified food). The group also creates databases for public use, including one on consumer products that may contain bisphenol A (BPA), which the EWG and other groups maintain (without clear scientific evidence) is an endocrine disruptor that can cause cancer and other diseases.

Led by Ken Cook, a lobbyist and opponent of industrial agriculture, and a board that includes several prominent members of the organic and natural products industries, the group promotes organic techniques, because, according to its website: “Organic agriculture preserves biodiversity, improves soil health and saves energy – all the while saving American farmland from getting buried under tons of synthetic pesticides and fertilizers. But less than one percent of our farmland is dedicated to growing organic crops.” It annually puts out a Dirty Dozen list of fruits and groceries that consumers are urged to avoid because, EWG says, they are covered with ‘dangerous’ amounts of trace pesticides—a claim [totally at odds with mainstream science](#), but in accord with the marketing objectives of their organic donor base.

Read the Genetic Literacy Project [profile](#) and Activist Facts [review](#).

## **Greenpeace**

Based in Amsterdam, [Greenpeace](#) is now the world’s largest environmental non-profit organization. Founded in the late 1960s, Greenpeace now has a budget in excess of \$300million.

Greenpeace logo

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The organization (and its various subsidiaries) opposes genetic engineering, using tactics that include protests and destruction of test fields of genetically modified crops. The organization, through its South Asian chapters, opposes genetically modified Golden Rice, in favor of organic crops. The advocacy has ignored scientific studies and USDA reports showing that organic yields have, except for a few crops, lagged behind conventional farm yields.

[According to](#) Greenpeace:

GMOs should not be released into the environment since there is not an adequate scientific understanding of their impact on the environment and human health....We also oppose all patents on plants, animals and humans.

The website does not mention that thousands of scientific studies have shown no known impact on human health, and no more environmental impact than conventional or organic seeds and plants. It also fails to mention that conventional and some organic products also are patented.

Read the Genetic Literacy Project [profile](#) here.

**GreenAmerica logo**

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Created in 1982 as “Co-Op America,” this Washington, D.C.-based [Green America](#) advocates a range of practices, including adoption of organic foods and avoidance of genetic engineering in agriculture..

According to its website, “GMOs are not part of a sustainable system of agriculture. In order to sustain our soil and food supply, we must move to a regenerative system of agriculture, with its basis in the principles of organics.”

The organization makes a number of statements that have been refuted by scientific evidence and USDA and other government studies. For example, Green America claims that GMOs have boosted pesticide use, harming honeybees and monarch butterflies, points to the “lack of unbiased scientific research on the long-term human and environmental health impacts,” and that “Several studies conducted by scientists have called into question the safety of consuming GE crops.”

[GMO Inside](#), which operates as a coalition, was founded in 2012 by organic and GMO-free “super food” company Nutiva CEO John Roulac along with Maharishi movement follower [Jeffrey Smith](#), and is “powered by” [Green America](#).” The GMO-Inside campaign aggressively lobbies for mandatory GMO labeling initiatives throughout the U.S. and encourages members to purchase or download GMO Inside “caution” labels they can use in stores to brand products which do not support GMO-free labeling.

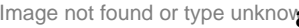
GMO Inside members include about two dozen organic, natural product and alternative health groups promoting advocacy and commercial interest groups seeking cautionary warning labels on foods containing GMOs.

Read GLP’s profile on [Green America’s GMO Inside](#).

Read Green America's profile in [Guidestar](#).

## Just Label It

Housed in and staffed by the Environmental Working Group in Washington, D.C., [Just Label It](#) was created in 2012 by Gary Hirshberg, who also is founder of Stonyfield Organic in cooperation with "Organic

Voices" (an organic industry coalition which also goes by "Only Organic"  and "The Organic Voices Action Fund") in cooperation with, staffed and housed at, the Environmental Working Group in Washington, DC.

EWG vice president Scott Faber who serves as Organic Voices executive director told a North Carolina Biotechnology conference hosted by North Carolina State University in November 2014 that the Just Label It campaign was an EWG hosted project. EWG's latest available tax filings (2012) make no related disclosures about this industry funded marketing-related campaign relationship.

The site presents data and certain information in misleading ways. For example, when explaining the environmental impact of GMOs, it correctly states that herbicide use has increased since the advent of GM-crops, but fails to mention there has been an overall decrease in pesticides over the past 20 years.

It also mischaracterizes the concept of "superweeds" as a GM-specific problem, not mentioning the fact that weeds resistant to herbicides is a problem involving all herbicides, and not just glyphosate and other chemicals used on genetically modified crops.

Hirshberg, former president and current chairman of Stonyfield Organic (now owned by Groupe Danone, is known for his "militant business" practices. Often seen wearing a doctor's lab coat, he promotes organic foods as more nutritious and safer than conventional, marketing his products with such claims as "No Yucky Stuff!" and warns that children who eat non-organic foods are at higher risk of illness, disease and developmental disorders, and that organic foods are more sustainable than conventional foods.

Read the Genetic Literacy Project [profile of Just Label It! here](#).

Read the GLP profile of [Gary Hirshberg here](#).

## Consumer Reports



**ConsumerReports**

ne Consumer Reports has advised potential buyers on a wide range of

products and services, from toasters to automobiles. In 2012, the magazine was

spun off from the non-profit organization [Consumers Union](#), leaving the organization to focus exclusively on advocacy issues.

CU's tactics include aggressive online promotions and advertising (spending nearly \$10 million a year on Internet advertising with Google alone) and publicity via extensive media relations efforts. It also joins in litigation, legislative and regulatory lobbying and direct grant making with other organizations like the [Center for Food Safety](#) in campaigns opposing various modern agriculture technologies and practices while lending support to organic food and natural product industry initiatives.

Most of CU's anti-biotech drumbeats come from food policy "expert" Jean Halloran, senior scientist Michael Hansen, and environmental health scientist Urvashi Rangan, PhD. CU anti-biotech activities include generation of promotional materials (videos, press releases, public service announcements, etc...), legislative lobbying and presentation of testimony, report writing and promotion of "research" (typically interpretations of other studies) claiming health, environment and other concerns associated with agricultural biotechnology products. CU's Hansen has served as a member of the Center for Food Safety's advisory board and is a frequent co-presenter at their events.

CU/CR have greatly expanded their public criticism of GM foods in recent years. In October 2014, CR published "[Where GMOs hide in your food](#)," detailing how consumers could avoid GMOs that "lurk" in the food supply. Its position is that GM foods have not been "proven safe" and the government does not mandate testing of GM crops and foods (although no crop or food has been approved without extensive testing submitted to the US government for evaluation).

Consumers Union has published several reports criticizing genetic modification of food. They have misleadingly implied that organic food is "pesticide free."

Read GLP profile of [Consumer Reports here](#).

Read GLP profile of [Michael Hansen here](#).

Read Consumer Reports 2016 [Annual Report](#).

## Food Democracy Now

Based in Clear Lake, Iowa, [Food Democracy Now](#) was founded in 2008 by David Murphy, with the support of [Michael Pollan](#), [Marion Nestle](#) and other organic and natural food advocates. It claims to be a grassroots organization of more than 650,000 “farmers” dedicated to building a “sustainable



food system...that gives our communities equal access to healthy food, and respects

the dignity of the farmers who produce it.” It says the food system is “fundamentally broken,” writing: “We believe in recreating regional food systems, supporting the growth of humane, natural and organic farms, and protecting the environment.”

Its major focus is campaigning against GMOs and criticizing agri-businesses unless they are linked to the organic industry. a former environmental lobbyist who was returning home to Iowa to help fight what the organization’s calls a “factory farm.” Its board of directors consists of environmental activists and leaders in organic food investments and management.

The organization’s website repeats several reports that have been discredited by reputable scientists, including reports by Moms Against Monsanto claiming that levels of glyphosate had been found in food, and that formaldehyde was discovered in genetically modified crops and food.

FDN regularly promotes the work of US Right to Know ([USRTK](#)), which has FOIA’d more than 40 scientists and science communicators in an attempt to intimidate them into not speaking out about agricultural biotechnology.

Read the Genetic Literacy Project [profile](#).

Read the FDN Guidestar [profile](#)

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[Friends of the Earth](#) (FOE) was founded in 1969 by [Robert Orville Anderson](#), [David Brower](#), Donald Aitken and Jerry Mander with significant financial support from Anderson who was the chairman of [Atlantic Richfield Oil Co.](#) (now part of BP) and was concerned about the proliferation of nuclear energy

The organization opposes all forms of biotechnology. It has opposed the use of synthetic biology in manufacturing compounds used in processed foods. It also opposes the consumption of meat, due to harm to the environment and human health. FOE actively campaigns against the use of lipids derived from genetically engineered yeast and bacteria that could replace the common food additive palm oil — despite the fact that these GE organisms could end or limit deforestation of rainforests which is caused by the expansion of oil palm plantations. It is against the use of nanotechnology which FOE claims has introduced dangerous “nanomaterials” into many products like “cosmetics, sunscreens and a plethora of other consumer products.”

FOE has produced several reports purporting that the popular class of pesticide known as neonicotinoids is causing an alarming number of bee deaths. FOE has petitioned Congress and many sellers of pesticides to eliminate their sales. FOE also has strong ties and coordinates and shares staff with other international anti-GMO/anti-pesticide organizing groups such as Via Campesina and Third World Network, and is active in what scientists say are disinformation campaigns against GMOs in the developing world.

[According to FOE](#): “Despite a concerted corporate PR campaign claiming that the question is settled, there is no scientific consensus on the safety of agricultural GMOs. More than 300 scientists, physicians and scholars state this clearly in a joint statement, and the World Health Organization concurs.” The statement is inaccurate because WHO has endorsed the scientific consensus on GMO safety.

Read Genetic Literacy Project [profile](#) on FOE.

Read FOE’s Guidestar [profile](#).

## Union of Concerned Scientists

Based in Cambridge, Massachusetts, the [Union of Concerned Scientists](#) was founded in 1974. The UCS is involved in advocacy in a wide range of activities, including farming.

Originally an anti-toxin group, UCS has grown into a player on everything from livestock antibiotics and DDT to electric cars and greenhouse gases. It has historically had a significant anti-biotech online platform

led by  scientists, such as Margaret Mellon, Jane Rissler and Doug Gurian-Sherman.

UCS, under Gurian-Sherman, denied there is a scientific consensus on the safety of GMOs despite the



fact that every major independent science agency in the world of note has publicly reached that conclusion.

UCS's objections to GMOs have gone far beyond roundup-ready soybeans and biotech alfalfa. It also has objected strongly to biopharma crops, argued that anti-hunger legislation should be "technology neutral," and painted GMOs as "seed contaminators" because of pollen drift. UCS typically objects to the use of crop yield as a critical metric of GMOs' success and necessity, focusing attention instead on "lack of income to buy food, lack of infrastructure like roads to get products to market, trade policies that disadvantage farmers in the developing world," etc. But even on crop yields, UCS doesn't cede any ground: In 2008 the group published its last big anti-biotech report, titled "Failure to Yield: Evaluating the Performance of Genetically Engineered Crops," which is [cited as canon](#) by anti-GMO and pro-labeling activists such as Gary Hirshberg, founder of Stonyfield Farms and the Just Label It campaign.

The organization's reports also have perpetuated the "superweed" concept as unique to genetically modified food, "monoculture" and industrial agriculture. It posts reports and backgrounders that grossly misrepresent the science of biotechnology that appear designed less to inform and more to frighten people about health and environmental problems associated with genetically modified food. It currently campaigns aggressively for agro-ecology, arguing that there are few documented benefits of GE technology.

The UCS received \$38 million in contributions and grants in 2015, according to IRS filings.

Read the GLP [profile of UCS's former senior scientist, Doug Gurian-Sherman](#), who was forced out of the organization in 2014, and is now an advocacy lobbyist with the Center for Food Safety.

Read the Guidestar [profile](#).

Read the Activist Facts [profile](#).



## Organic Consumers Association

The [Organic Consumers Association](#), founded in 1998 by Ronnie Cummins, who worked with anti-technology activist Jeremy Rifkin since the group, originally called the Pure Food Campaign, was created in 1988.

The OCA is one of the most aggressive of North America's anti-GMO activist groups. One of its stated goals is to turn American agriculture into a 100 percent organic enterprise within 50 years. Its main area of focus is opposing GMOs. The organization works in partnership with commercial organic, natural product, herbal supplement and alternative health marketers such as Natural News and Mercola.com.



OCA is also known for its [opposition to vaccines](#) and its promotion of the ‘science of homeopathy.’

The association also has attempted to cast doubt on the robustness and even honesty of government testing of pesticides and other ag chemicals, [as well as](#) genetically engineered food. Like many groups, the OCA has attempted to paint Monsanto as harmful to consumers and the public, in attempts to discredit genetic modifications and support organic practices.

It has contributed [\\$274.500 to start up and fund the US Right to Know](#) organization, which is targeting scientists and science communicators with controversial Freedom of Information requests in an attempt to tie them to the biotech industry.

Read the Genetic Literacy Project [profile here](#).

Read the Activist Facts [profile here](#).

**[Andrew Porterfield](#) is a writer, editor and communications consultant for academic institutions, companies and non-profits in the life sciences. He is based in Camarillo, California. Follow [@AMPorтерfield](#) on Twitter.**

**For more background on the Genetic Literacy Project, read [GLP](#) on Wikipedia.**