

How Berkeley-led academics conspired with anti-GMO groups to attack Food Evolution movie

A University of California Berkeley PhD candidate wrote a widely publicized letter attacking the science documentary [Food Evolution](#) in June (signed by more than 40 other academics) at the behest of the very groups exposed in the film, without disclosing her connection, emails released on [Muckrock.com](#) show.

KaZdiBoOp d NwJXnQ
Maywa
Montenegro

[Read Kevin Folta's [response](#) to the campaign by 45 academics and food journalists to discredit the Food Evolution movie.]

These groups (Pesticide Action Network, Center for Food Safety, Small Planet Institute, and Friends of the Earth) all collaborated with Maywa Montenegro on the drafting of this letter and promoting its dissemination afterwards. These organizations share close ties with the organic industry (according to ActivistFacts.com both Patagonia and Ben & Jerry's) with a vested interest in the continued demonization of biotech crops.

[Read the GLP's profiles on [Pesticide Action Network](#), [Center for Food Safety](#), and [Friends of the Earth](#).]

On Jun 20, 2017, at 9:08 PM, Marcia Ishii-Eiteman <mie@panna.org> wrote:

Hi all,

Just a clarification about Maywa's excellent letter, "Response to UC Berkeley Screening of Food Evolution" (now posted on PF's website) which I *think* might be what John was referring to in his note below.

The "Response" letter was authored by our brilliant colleague, Maywa Montenegro, who integrated feedback from several of us (Tim Wise, Doug G-S, Antonio R-A and 3 of us from PAN - Margaret, Emily and I - and perhaps a couple others whom I'm forgetting. The 3 of us at PAN viewed the entire film at the PAN office last month, as I had received a special limited-time authorization code from Commonwealth Club, a few days before my May 23 ClimateOne panel debate with a Monsanto VP and the film's producer, Scott Kennedy. Unfortunately, the authorization code was valid for only a few days, so I'm not able to access it anymore or share it with others.)

The film had been previewed by members of the Pesticide Action Network in preparation for a panel debate, but Maywa Montenegro appeared to not have seen the movie herself.

One Berkeley professor who signed the letter, Miguel Altieri (one of the few to have seen the film), made it clear in an email that his intent was to silence any information that does not fit the anti-GMO narrative.

Maya the question is not more conversations and clarifications about GMOs..... The issue is to take a more radical position like Via Campesina , SOCLA and others of total rejection of the

technology....

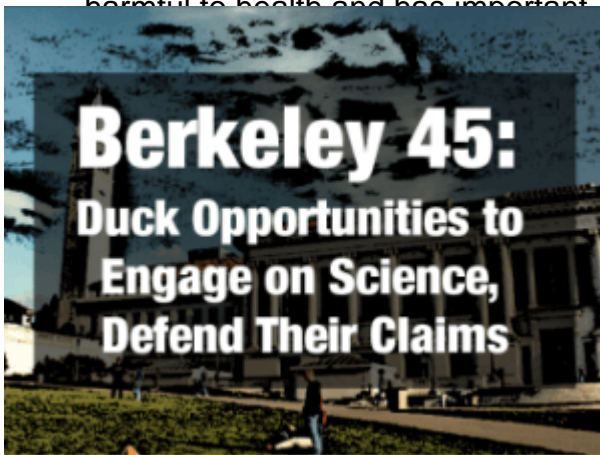
Another, University Vermont Professor Ernesto Mendez, imagined a 100% independently developed transgenic crop resistant to drought conditions. He insinuated that such a crop should not be developed in case “powerful corporate interests” appropriated the technology.

UC Davis Professor Alison Van Eenennaam appeared at length in the film and was disappointed in the letter. She described it in a blog post as “the actual definition of confirmation bias”.

As academics, shouldn't you see/analyze something before you offer a detailed critique? I have not yet seen your movie but I offer the following criticisms.....

Molecular Biology Professor Kevin Folta from the University of Florida expressed concern [about how the letter makes his academic colleagues look](#).

As a university administrator, I really have to question the judgment of these folks. Would you sign your name to a public document that says climate change is a hoax? Would you sign your name to a public document that says vaccines cause autism? Here they are trashing a technology that the National Academies clearly states has more benefit than risk by far, is not harmful to health and has important, manageable environmental impacts we need to address.



Be aware that the letter in question was co-authored by these

activist groups as the email from the Pesticide Action Network

was shared on many of the email listservs they are a part of. None have shared public concern over the incorrect promotion of the letter being authored solely by a Berkeley PhD candidate.

They were, however, warned by Carnegie Mellon Professor John Soluri about being “intellectually lazy and strategically silly” for not having evaluated the film by actually watching it.

Subject: Re: Response to: Early Screening of Food Evolution

Date: Thursday, June 15, 2017 at 6:54:55 PM Eastern Daylight Time

From: John Soluri

To: Ben Gordon, MAYWA MONTENEGRO

CC: ucb.range@lists.berkeley.edu, divfarmingsystems@lists.berkeley.edu, espm_gradstudents@lists.berkeley.edu, NWAEGInternational@umich.edu, agro-ecommunity@googlegroups.com, engaged_agroecology@googlegroups.com, Student Organic Garden

Folks,

I agree with Ben that people who are invested need to do their homework — watch the film and then evaluate it. Anything else is intellectually lazy and strategically silly.

Ben, I will be curious to see if the film explains why “politics and fear tactics” have not prevented massive plantings of GMO soy in Brazil and Argentina? And hopefully the benefits accrued to farmers in those countries will be elucidated as well.

JS

Neither Ms. Montenegro, nor the Pesticide Action Network, have responded to my request for comment.

A version of this article appeared on Medium as “PhD candidate failed to disclose activist connection in letter attacking science film” and has been republished here with permission from the author.

Stephan Neidenbach is a middle school teacher in Annapolis, Maryland. He runs the Facebook group [We Love GMOs and Vaccines](#). Follow him on Twitter [@welovegv](#).