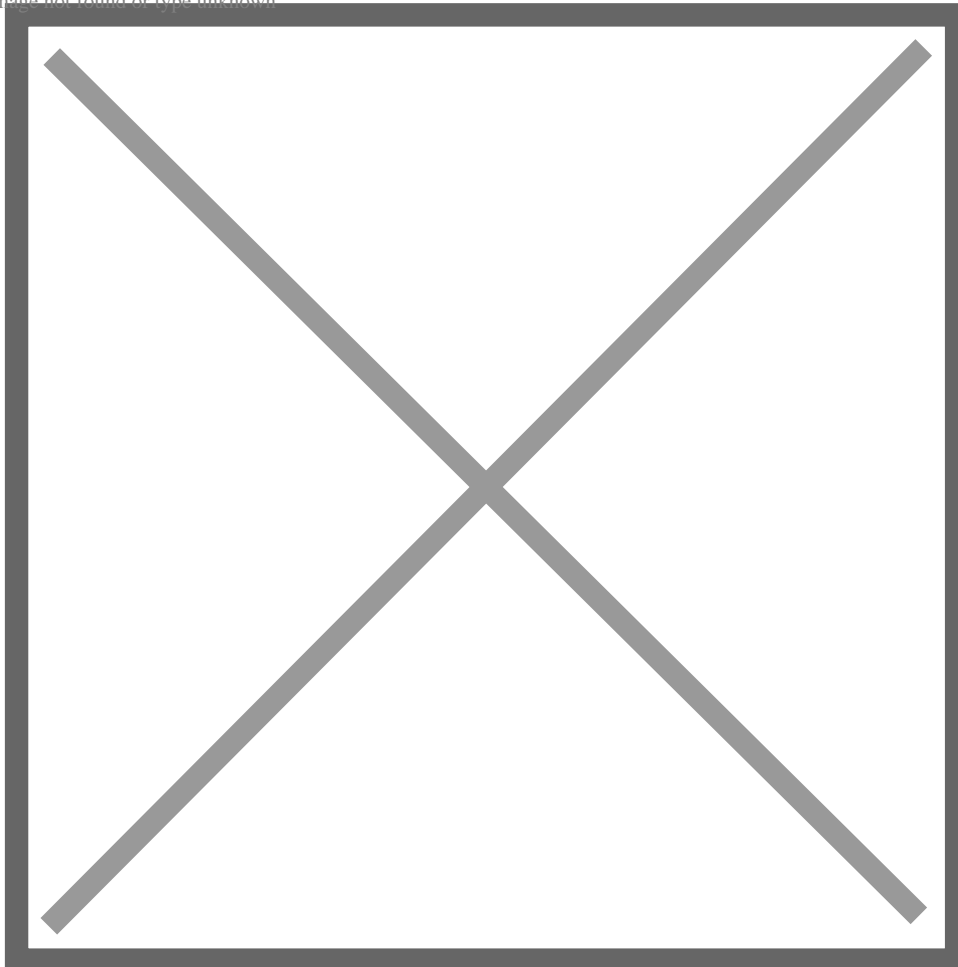


Viewpoint: Anti-GMO groups ‘using the COVID lab-leak theory to spur opposition to a wide swath of important, even life-saving, biotechnologies’

Hoping to keep their cause alive in the wake of the pandemic, the anti-GMO movement has glommed on to a lab-leak origin story for SARS-CoV-2. Their rhetoric sounds quite reasonable, at least at first glance, and centers around important issues we all should be concerned about. The organic industry-funded outfit US Right to Know, for example, [observes that](#) “we are still without answers as to how and why this virus emerged seemingly out of nowhere” and alleges that federal agencies like the NIH have withheld information about the pandemic’s origins.

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The origin of the virus, and its jump from animals to humans is a question worth investigating. Credit: Infinity Wave

Some scientists, conspiracy theory experts and media outlets have reacted to USRTK’s sudden interest in virology by highlighting the group’s ties to anti-vaccine activists. This is a clever attempt to discredit

USRTK and its allies, but it's ultimately a mistake that ignores what anti-GMO activists are up to with their lab-leak advocacy.

Groups like USRTK have always couched their anti-technology agenda in terms—"pursuing truth and transparency in public health"—that resonate with most Americans. They are doing this again by using the pandemic to attack *all* biotechnology. Tying these activist outfits to anti-vaxxers will not prevent them from gaining support among a certain segment of the general public for that agenda, which should concern everybody in the science community.

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Abusing the lab-leak theory

Nobody knows if SARS-CoV-2 naturally jumped from animals to humans or somehow "escaped" from a lab, and we may never know for sure. But a lab leak is a plausible scenario that has been investigated by [reputable voices](#) in scientific and geopolitical circles. Respected science writer Matt Ridley and Broad Institute molecular biologist Alina Chan may be a lot of things, but they're not kooky conspiracy theorists and [their arguments](#) need to be taken seriously.

The real problem is that many activist groups have backed the lab-leak scenario because it comports with their more comprehensive and decidedly unscientific anti-biotech agenda. This is what the media has missed in its coverage of anti-GMO groups endorsing a lab leak. It's a "controversial" idea to start with, [The Daily Beast reported](#) recently, and US Right to Know promotes it because they have graduated from agitating against biotech crops to providing a sheen of legitimacy for the conspiratorial musings of their primary donor, the Organic Consumers Association. [Daily Beast](#):

Like USRTK, the 23-year-old Organic Consumers Association began as a group preoccupied with pesticides and genetically modified organisms. But as it gained financial backing from ultra-rich backers in the wellness sector ... it adopted their conspiratorial anti-vaccine views ...

Earlier this year, OCA founder Ronnie Cummins, who has also advanced 9/11 'truthier' narratives, co-authored a book with [Joe] Mercola which purported to expose 'The Great Reset, Lockdowns, Vaccine Passports, and the New Normal.' The book's footnotes included multiple citations of USRTK research on COVID-19's origins and, in promoting the book last month, Cummins referred to USRTK as a 'longtime ally.'

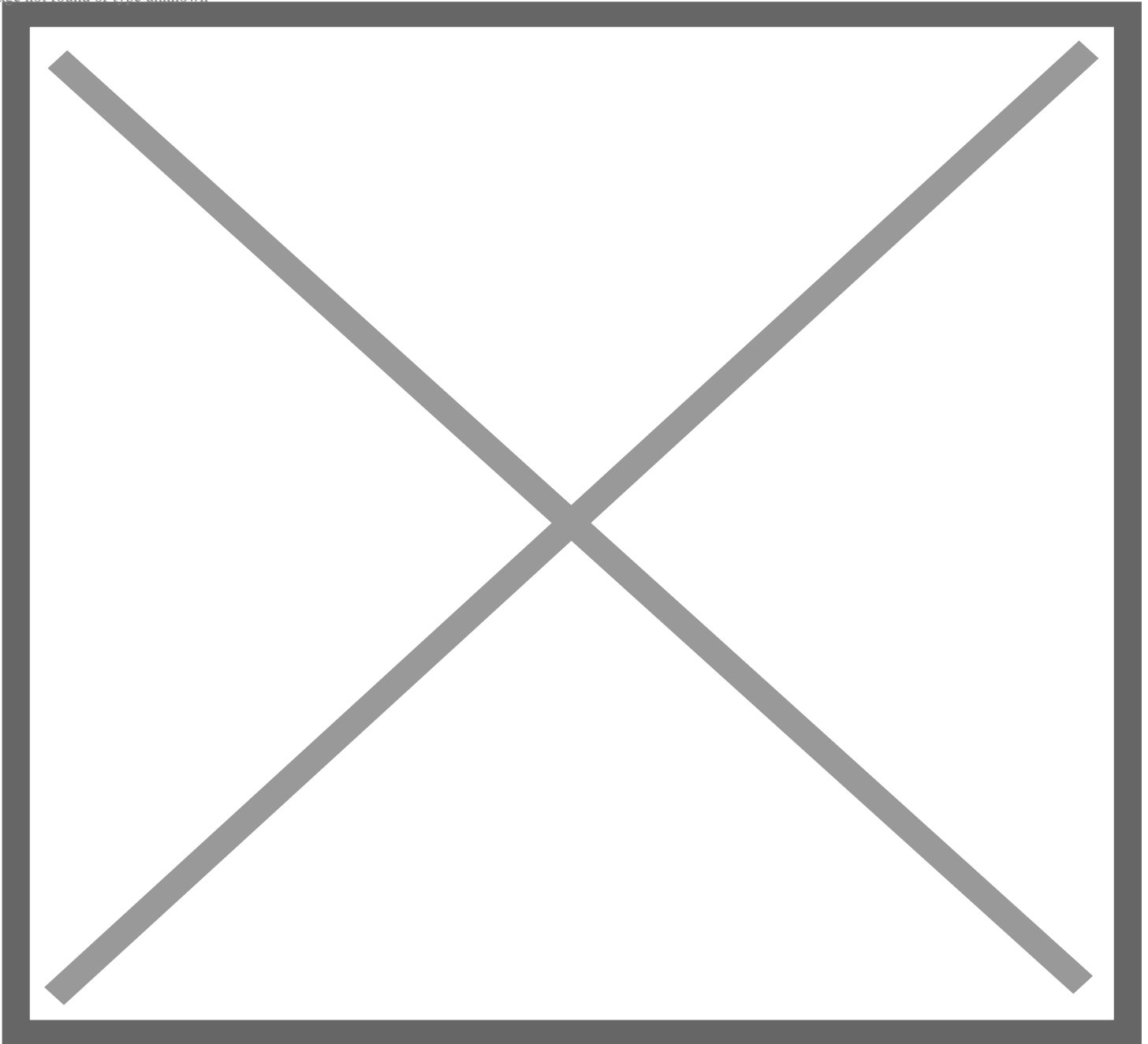
The conspiratorial leanings of the anti-biotech movement have been known [for many years](#); highlighting them now serves little purpose. Our real concern should be that USRTK and others are using the lab-leak theory to spur opposition to a wide swath of important, even life-saving, biotechnologies.

Consider the Institute for Responsible Technology (IRT), yet [another activist group](#) funded by Joe Mercola and closely linked to the Non-GMO Project. Whatever IRT believes about the pandemic, notice that their fundraising letters are clearly designed to alarm people about issues that have little to do the pandemic. The lab-leak theory is a useful rhetorical tool, tagged on almost as [an afterthought](#):

*IRT is on a mission to get the word out against the REPLACEMENT OF NATURE [emphasis in original]. Can you help us make a difference? Consider just a few applications of this new gene editing technology known as GMOs 2.0 ... Do any of these new technologies make you a bit nervous? Will you join us in preventing a gene edited future **and raising awareness about gain-function- research?** [my emphasis]*

Engineering disease-fighting insects or breeding crops suited for different environments has next-to-nothing in common with gain-of-function research, [which](#) “aims or is expected to (and/or, perhaps, actually does) increase the transmissibility and/or virulence of pathogens.” While that [could be considered](#) genetic modification, it serves a very different purpose and carries risks that are unrelated to other biotech applications. Such nuances are irrelevant to IRT and its allies, though, because their ultimate goal is to prevent “a gene-edited future”—full stop.

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Why does this matter? There are millions of [jaded Americans](#) suffering from pandemic fatigue. Fed up with lockdowns, travel restrictions, and mandatory vaccines, they're again inclined to take the anti-GMO movement seriously. Indeed, the fact that mainstream science so dislikes USRTK might even help the group's cause with people who are enraged by the pandemic response. The science community should therefore combat the misconception that a lab-leak theory undermines the safety of biotechnology more

generally.

A familiar pattern

This cohort of activist groups is adept at co-opting the public's concerns. When journalist Matt Taibbi suggested in April that Google had censored USRTK, group co-founder Gary Ruskin [told him that](#)

I really strongly believe in the First Amendment and have been concerned for probably during that entire period about when the censors come for someone, they could easily come for you tomorrow.

Taibbi was apparently unaware that USRTK exists to [harass and intimidate](#) scientists into silence. It's frankly disturbing how far Ruskin's group has gone [in its efforts](#) to shut up academics who speak publicly about biotechnology: publishing their emails, writing hit pieces about them and even [leaking documents](#) to propaganda outlets like Russia Today (RT), which will promote the same anti-GMO agenda.

In other words, USRTK and its allies aren't on the warpath against censorship, nor are they campaigning for safer virology research in any meaningful sense. But they will use those issues to garner public sympathy. Pointing out their ties to anti-vaccine activists is amusing but mostly useless as a means of expanding the public's acceptance of biotechnology.

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