

GMWatch: Anti-biotech ‘news hub’ goal is to ‘remove all GMO crops and food’

GMWatch is a UK-based nonprofit that “seeks to counter the enormous corporate political power and propaganda of the GMO industry and its supporters,” according to its [website](#). Its stated purpose is to disrupt and combat what it sees as the “infiltration” of the biotech industry into the mainstream media. To this end, it serves as a de facto news hub for anti-GMO activists. The organization was established as part of the Norfolk Genetic Information Network online “news” service.

It was founded in 1998 by Jonathan Matthews, who still serves as the co-managing editor, along with Claire Robinson (more on both below) and is based in Norwich, UK. Matthews and Robinson serve as its managing editors. GM Watch is not an incorporated entity, and appears to consist solely of Matthews and Robinson. It is not registered as a charity with the UK’s Charities Commission, nor as a business with the UK Companies House. Robinson is currently on the board of advisers of GMO Free USA and is “research director” at the anti-biotech group Earth Open Source, based in the UK.

According to GM Watch’s website, the organization is “an independent organization that seeks to counter the enormous corporate political power and propaganda of the biotech industry and its supporters.” The organization promotes “citizen juries” and other grass roots movements to counter academic research on GMO benefits and safety.

A Maharishi connection

Matthews and Robinson are affiliated with [Maharishi International University](#), based in Fairfield, Iowa, the global home of the [transcendental meditation \(TM\)](#) movement. TM’s detractors call it a cult. Graduates of the university have run for various political positions under the banner of the [Natural Law Party](#), which it created.

GMWatch coordinates its ‘message’ with long time anti-biotech activist [John Fagan](#), a professor of molecular biology at Maharishi University. In 2008 Fagan was given the TM title: “[Raja with Global Responsibility for Food Purity and Safety and for Healthy Invincibility](#)” (Raja means Indian king or prince). In this capacity he is charged with creating a global network of labs to use scientific testing methods to verify food purity and quality of Maharishi Vedic Organic products. Fagan is also a founder of the company Genetic ID (though he is no longer affiliated with it), which verifies products as non-GMO for a fee.

GMWatch’s stated goal is to eliminate all genetically modified crops and foods and slow down the progress of biotechnology and advanced genetic research. A long time advocate of mandatory GM labels, it sees the labeling battle as an interim step in branding crop biotechnology as inherently dangerous, encouraging consumers to reject it. GMWatch articles promote select studies, almost all placed in marginal ‘predatory’ and ‘pay for play’ journals, that purport to find dangers in GMOs and the herbicide glyphosate.

Central to its efforts is the circulation of the controversial research by French biologist-activist [Gilles-Éric Séralini](#) (profile [here](#)). (Claire Robinson is also founder and editor of the [GMOSeralini](#) site, which acts as a hub for disseminating his various studies.) Séralini's most infamous study, oft cited by GM Watch, is "Long-term toxicity of a Roundup herbicide and a Roundup-tolerant genetically modified maize," [originally published](#) in *Food and Chemical Toxicology* in 2012. He concluded that rats fed glyphosate resistant genetically engineered corn developed grotesque cancerous tumors. The conclusions initially were widely reported in the mainstream press and amplified worldwide by GMWatch and anti-GMO websites.

The paper was subsequently [retracted](#) by the journal the following year after a detailed review following criticism from scientists and regulatory bodies, which found a pattern of bias and design flaws. The study used cancer-prone rats, controls shoddy and the data cherry-picked (e.g. data showed some rats fed glyphosate had few tumors, which the authors did not highlight in their commentary).

Séralini and anti-GMO groups [claimed](#) the journal bowed to industry pressure. GMWatch called the 2013 retraction "[illicit, unscientific, and unethical](#)." The paper was subsequently [republished](#), without peer review, in the marginal journal *Environmental Sciences Europe*, to further [criticism](#) by scientists.

GMWatch does not report on studies that contradict its ideological belief that GM foods are harmful, except to attempt to discredit them. Managing editor Robinson [heavily criticized](#) the letter written in 2016 by [110 Nobel winners](#), which criticized Greenpeace for its role in blocking the development of Golden Rice, a potentially life saving biofortified crop. Robinson claimed the biotech industry "exploited" the laureates. Robinson also said the National Academies on Science, Medicine and Engineering is "[at best misleading and at worst lies](#)" when its May 2016 report concluded GMOs were safe for human consumption.

Managing Editor

Jonathan Matthews, has been the director of the [ICS english language school](#) in Norwich, UK since 1996. Mathews said the idea for GMWatch stemmed from a weekly column he used to write in *The Ecologist*. Matthews was largely responsible for a [massive smear campaign against Mark Lynas](#) for the simple crime of the latter changing his mind on biotechnology when presented with evidence, and [insinuated that Lynas' apology speech](#) was but a PR ploy. I asked Mark about his experiences with GM Watch, and he had this to say, "GM Watch is at the extreme end even of the anti-GMO movement. They specialize in smear tactics, innuendo and character assassination. They're not part of any conversation I want to be involved in. The whole site reeks of hatred."

- **Claire Robinson**, MPhil, was formerly the research director at the sustainability nonprofit Earth Open Source (read GLP Biotech Gallery profile of Earth Open Source [here](#))

), which is directed by 

John Fagan (read GLP Biotech Gallery

profile of Fagan [here](#)). She and Fagan wrote the book [GMO Myths and Truths](#), which is based on their [belief](#) that “GMOs are not safe or necessary”.

Robinson is also the founding editor of the anti-GMO propaganda site [GMO Seralini](#) and is affiliated with numerous other anti-GMO websites including [GMO Evidence](#), [GMO Judy Carman](#) (another well known anti-GMO activist-scientist) and [Sustainable Pulse](#), a news service that circulates only stories critical of GMOs. Robinson has a background in research, writing, and the communication of topics relating to public health, science and policy, and the environment. Robinson appears to also have multiple ties and joint projects with Jeffrey M. Smith’s (Read Biotech Gallery profile on Smith [here](#)) Maharishi movement and Institute for Responsible Technology campaigns. She is currently on the board of advisers of GMO Free USA.

Funding Sources

GM Watch is not a registered charity, but does take personal donations. It is also funded by donations from numerous NGOs, charitable foundations and trusts. Since it is not registered, it has not filed reports on income/expenditures and it is unclear how GM Watch operates, or receives funding. The following is what GM Watch discloses on its website:

- 2011 funders included Friends of the Earth Europe, Friends of the Earth UK, the Soil Association, and the Courtyard Trust.
- July 2011 to May 2012 a GMWatch editor received payment from [Jeffrey M. Smith’s Institute for Responsible Technology](#) for editorial support to the IRT’s newsletters.
- 2012 and 2013 GMWatch received funding from the Isvara Foundation, Friends of the Earth Europe and the Courtyard Trust.
- 2014 GMWatch received funding from Food Democracy Now!, the Isvara Foundation, and the Sheepdrove Trust.
- In 2015–2017 GMWatch received funding from Friends of the Earth Europe, the Sheepdrove Trust and the JMG Foundation.
- In 2017-2018 the organization received funding from Sheepdrove and JMG.

- Recently, GM Watch claimed its campaigns were backed by “the work of dedicated volunteers in different countries around the world...”

Despite its claim of accepting only “independent” money, all of the NGOs that are listed donors have strong ties to the anti-GMO movement and several donors have strong ties to the organic farming industry:

JMG Foundation, created from the estate of the late billionaire tycoon [James Goldsmith](#) owned a large [organic farm during his life](#). His son Zac Goldsmith was the editor of the *The Ecologist* until 2007, an anti-GMO publication that Claire Robinson also contributes to. In 2012, Zac was forced to sell his [£6.5 million](#) organic farm following a divorce.

Isvara Foundation, is backed by businessman [Ayman Jallad](#), who made his money in selling American tractors in the Middle East. One of Jallad’s [apparent goals for the foundation](#) is to expose the “American Jewish lobby” which is responsible in his eyes “for all kinds of mass murder and human rights abuse.” Their web page was set up by [The World Development Movement](#). Under their new name Global Justice Now, the organization recently issued a report [demonizing the Gates Foundation](#) for promoting both vaccines and GMOs.

Sheepdrove Trust [owns and operates](#) a 900-hectare organic farm in the United Kingdom. Its donations to GM Watch are in reality payments to Claire Robinson, along with donations to other “organizations” like Moms Across America, Collin Todhunter, GMO-Free USA, the GM pesticide “Unacceptable Levels” film. It also is a major contributor to Greenpeace and other alternative medicine and homeopathy groups.

Criticisms

Mark Lynas, a writer, visiting fellow at Cornell Alliance and former Greenpeace activist [wrote](#): “GMWatch is at the extreme end even of the anti-GMO movement. They specialize in smear tactics, innuendo and character assassination. They’re not part of any conversation I want to be involved in. The whole site reeks of hatred.”

BBC rejects GM Watch complaints on pro-Bt brinjal program: “BBC’s highest complaints body, the Editorial Standards Committee, found that all the complaints made about the programme were without merit. Anti-GMO activists must know and accept that Bt brinjal reduces insecticides by 80-90 percent or more.”

Kevin Folta, professor at the University of Florida and target of anti-GMO groups, wrote on “criticism from US-RTK, (Paul) Thacker, GM Watch and the rest of the web’s libel artists...Their hate speech and falsehoods get a handful of retweets from folks that have science and scientists. Their little echo hive feeds on itself. It is pretty simple.”

Resources

- [GM Watch Facebook page](#)

- [GM Watch on Twitter](#)

References

- 1 <http://www.gmwatch.org/index.php/about>