

Michael Hansen: Architect of Consumers Union ongoing anti-GMO campaign

Michael K. Hansen (born 1956) is thought by critics to be the prime mover behind the ongoing campaign against agricultural biotechnology at Consumer Reports. He is an evolutionary ecologist who serves as senior scientist at [Consumers Union](#) and leads their farming, food and animal agriculture (beef, Mad Cow Disease, dairy hormones) related initiatives.^{[1][2]} He [contends](#) that “there are safety issues that are raised by this technology”. The National Academy of Sciences, the European Commission and hundreds of other independent science groups are [on record saying](#) GM crops pose no unusual safety or health challenges and can be as or more sustainable than organic and conventional agriculture.

Hansen contends that the biggest issue is that genetic engineering makes crops more resistant to pesticides—something that he contends could affect the long-term health of people, although there are no independent studies that support that contention. He was [prominently featured](#) in advertisements in numerous states considering labeling bills making questionable claims about the safety of genetically modified foods. Consumer Reports has been challenged for making promoting misleading and biased information on biotechnology:

- [Consumers Union Makes False Claims Against the Safety of Genetically Modified Foods Based On Ideology Not Science](#)
- [Leaked memo highlights new axis of pseudoscience between Dr. Oz and Consumer Reports?](#)
- [Calling Out Consumer Reports](#)

Career

Michael Hansen who received his PhD in Evolutionary Ecology from Michigan State and has no formal training or expertise in medicine, food safety, toxicology or public health, works for the Institute for Consumer Policy Research (ICPR) – a semi-autonomous research facility affiliated with the better known Consumers Union (CU). Hansen is also an advisory board member to the Center for Food Safety which heads up many food-scare campaigns and lawsuits funded by the organic industry special interest groups.

Hansen’s cancer scares and other health related claims associated with conventional agriculture practices and biotechnology are among the most vocal and often quoted in the activist community. Hansen’s attacks are also among the most roundly rejected by physician groups (such as the American Medical Association), nutrition and food safety experts (such as the American Dietetic Association) and various other academic and scientific experts.

ICPR has been very involved in promoting the organic and natural products industries with Hansen leading their work on pesticide policies and alternatives to chemical fertilizers. The Institute’s projects are funded by foundation grants supported by numerous organic and natural products companies. Lately, Hansen has turned his focus from chemistry to biotechnology.

As Hansen has no formal training or credentials in either chemistry or biotechnology it is no surprise that

his first attacks were of a socio-economic nature. Hansen's early campaign was directed at concern for "corporate" control of technology by agricultural and chemical multinational corporations. In his opinion, the public sector and perhaps "small" biotechnology companies should lead this area of product development. Absent any significant public reaction to his concerns over regulating the size of the private sector and their role in technology development, Hansen turned to food-related cancer scares to move his agenda forward.

Education

- Northwestern University
- Michigan State, PhD, Evolutionary Ecology (Techniques of Integrated Pest Management)
- University of Kentucky, post-graduate study at the on the impacts of biotechnology on agricultural research, in the Department of Rural Sociology

Consumers Union

Hansen works as a research director and "senior scientist" for an arm of Consumers Union focusing primarily on food and agricultural production issues.

Center for Food Safety

Hansen serves as an advisory board member for [Andrew Kimbrell's Center for Food Safety](#) (CFS) and frequently is included in CFS-related litigation and media outreach efforts protesting GMOs, food irradiation and conventional agriculture practices.^[3]

ETC Group (RAFI)

Hansen is a board member of the [ETC Group \(RAFI\)](#). He sits on both their Canadian board of directors serving as secretary/treasurer and on the US-based 501c3 "Friends of ETC Group."

Advocacy

Michael Hansen is viewed as a food safety expert by some in the media and is frequently quoted in headline-grabbing environmental and food safety related news stories. He has been vocal on Mad Cow Disease/BSE, Posilac story and bird flu. The "not milk man" Robert Cohen calls Hansen a "hero" for his opposition to the use of rbST in the dairy industry. Hansen is a highly visible opponent of plant biotechnology claiming biotech foods are unsafe and untested. He also protests the use of various animal health and productivity products used in production agriculture.

In 2013 Hansen joined with fringe activists John Robbins, Ocean Robbins and Jeffrey M. Smith to participate in their "GMO Mini-Summit" attacking the safety of GMOs. His other campaign issues, while focusing mainly on food, have included claims that cell phones are linked to brain cancer (2011) and

joining with [Environmental Working Group](#) (EWG) protesting the use of nano-particles and other chemicals in sunscreens (2008-2012).

Mad Cow Disease

Michael Hansen of Consumers Union has been sharply critical of government assertions about the safety of the U.S. beef supply, but even he agrees about milk. Milk does contain white blood cells, which could carry the infectious agent, Hansen said. "There's a theoretical risk, but it's down near the bottom of the hierarchy," he said. "I would be worried about a lot of other things before I would be worried about milk."^[4]

Hansen and colleague [Uravashi Rangan](#) at Consumers Union promoted buying only organic beef as a way to protect your family against mad cow disease.^[5]

Animal Cloning

Michael Hansen, a senior research associate with Consumers Union, told the panel that, while meat and milk from cloned animals "may be safe, there presently are not enough data to reach this conclusion." He said that CVM's risk assessment "appears to be based largely on speculation and scientific theory, not on data." Hansen also blasted CVM's finding of qualitative similarities between cloned and conventional animals as "an almost meaningless statement in the context of food safety." It is not the similarities, but the frequency of problems like bacterial contamination and allergens that matter most, he argued. Claiming that surveys suggest consumers are "very negative about cloning and about eating products from cloning," Hansen said that a Presidential Commission should take up the issue of whether animals should be cloned for food. FDA should also require pre-market testing and labeling of clone-made foods, he said.^[6]

Keep Antibiotics Working

Campaign opposing the use of antibiotics in animal agriculture with the Center for Food Safety, Center for a Livable Future, Food Animal Concerns Trust, CSPI, IATP, Union of Concerned Scientists.^[7]

Bovine Growth Hormone (Posilac)

Hansen's most vocal attack on biotechnology has been on recombinant Bovine Somatotropin (a biotechnology derived growth hormone used to maintain high milk production levels in dairy cows). Hansen's first reporting on this issue began in 1990,^[8] with more recent updates of that report, Potential Public Health Impacts Of The Use Of Recombinant Bovine Somatotropin In Dairy Production, is posted on the Consumers Union website. The report, which appears on the Consumer's Union web site was written in September 1997 with the bold headline "for scientific review" by FAO-Codex's Joint Expert Committee on Food Additives. What

Hansen and CU fail to note is that the report was "rejected" by the scientific review panel of the joint FAO and WHO experts. In addition, Hansen has never been able to get his report accepted for publication by

any scientific peer-review journal. Even Hansen's affiliate Consumers Union, has contradicted his claims admitting in an article entitled, "Utter Insanity," in the May 1992 issue of Consumer Reports, "At present, drug residues in milk do not appear to present a significant health risk, judging by tests of milk that CU conducted last year."

Hansen has taken his presentation to International audiences who will listen. He has led discussions on anti-biotech issues with members of the Philippine Communist Party and the New People's Army guerrilla group in General Santos City.

Plant Biotechnology

Hansen argues "gene-splicing is radically different from conventional agriculture" and that "genetic engineering is not an extension of conventional plant breeding."^[9] Dating back to 1996 Hansen has lobbied against approvals and commercialization of GMOs citing a range of environmental and health concerns including claims that biotech corn is causing sterility in men. ^[10]

Hansen has engaged in joint protest and media activities with Ronnie Cummins of the [Organic Consumers Association](#) at the 2003 WTO Conference held in Cancun, Mexico to protest GMOs.^[11] Since 1998 Hansen has urged labeling for GMOs via Green Party and group publications claiming "genetically engineered food is different," "genetically engineered food can cause toxic effects," "genetic engineering can alter nutritional value," "genetic engineering can increase antibiotic resistance," "genetically engineered food can cause allergic reactions," and "consumers have a fundamental right to know what they are eating and that it's safe."^[12]

Hansen served on the USDA Advisory Committee on Agricultural Biotechnology from 1998-2002, and on the California Department of Food and Agriculture Food Biotechnology Advisory Committee, from 2001-2002. He was appointed to a FAO/WHO Joint Consultation on Genetically Engineered Animals in 2003. In June 2005, he joined the Board of ETC Group, previously known as RAFI.^[1]

Hansen is noted for lobbying on behalf of labeling for GMOs on specific pieces of legislation, including the Washington State initiative 522 in 2013^[14] and the 2002 Oregon labeling initiative Measure 27 specifically citing safety risks of GMOs. In a letter to the Oregon Governor Hansen and boss Jean Halloran and R. David Pittle, said, "mandatory labels could promote public health since they would result in government agencies becoming aware of genetically engineered foods grown in other countries that may not have through any safety assessment process... and help health professionals identify any unexpected effects..."^[15]

Pesticides

Hansen collaborated with Charles Benbrook and Jean Halloran on Consumers Union published "Pest Management at the Crossroads" and "Worst First" campaign attacking the safety of pesticide use, children's food and organic alternatives funded by the Joyce Foundation, Pew Charitable Trusts and the W. Alton Jones Foundation. The report attacked industry and EPA for failing to regulate "the worst 40

insecticide-food combinations in children's diets."[\[16\]](#)

Criticisms

Former U.S. Surgeon General C. Everett Koop singled out Hansen's cancer scare claims regarding biotechnology as "baseless, manipulative and completely irresponsible." [\[17\]](#)

Koop noted, "Unfortunately, a few fringe groups are using misleading statements and blatant falsehoods as part of a long-running campaign to scare consumers about a perfectly safe food. Their long-range goal is to prevent the benefits of biotechnology from reaching the public... it is necessary to condemn these attacks on the safety of milk for what they are: baseless, manipulative and completely irresponsible." C. Everett Koop on Hansen's claims that biotechnology applications in dairy products cause cancer.

Consumer's Union, and in particular their funding links through Hansen's research group to organic industry interest groups, was roundly criticized by journalism review Brill's Content in their August 1999 for this and other potential conflicts of interest by accepting grant money for pesticide and organic research from groups opposing pesticides.[\[18\]](#)

JunkScience.com raises numerous credibility challenges and potential conflicts of interest associated with [Consumers Union](#) and Michael Hansen on their website Consumers Distort.[\[19\]](#)

Affiliations

In addition to his board and research links noted above (ETC Group & Center for Food Safety), Hansen has been credited with joint campaign and support for numerous other anti-corporate, anti-agriculture groups and initiatives, including:

- The Organic Center (chief scientist Charles Benbrook noted in 2009, "Over the years Dr. Michael Hansen of the Consumers Union, and Dr. Robert Kremer, with the Agricultural Research Service in Columbia, Missouri have provided key information for developing and applying the projection model. Also, thanks to William Freese, Center for Food Safety, for assistance in compiling information on resistant weeds, emerging GE crops, and current developments in the biotechnology industry and regulatory agencies.")[\[20\]](#)
- Center for Food Safety multiple joint campaigns including legal challenge to FDA approved use of rbST, food irradiation, development of plant biotech pharmaceuticals, opposition to GM salmon, etc....[\[21\]](#) [\[22\]](#) [\[23\]](#)
- Organic Consumers Association Ronnie Cummins noted in 2003 "if you want to join in on the next bee swarm, you are invited to join yours truly, Ronnie Cummins, Michael Hansen, and the OCA on an escorted delegation to the WTO teach-ins and protests in Cancun Mexico September 4-11-2003," [\[24\]](#)

Bibliography

- Pest Control for House and Garden, Consumers Union 1992,
- Pest Management at the Crossroads, with Jean Halloran, a 1996 policy study on integrated pest management.
- He has also written reports on alternatives to agricultural pesticides in developing countries, and the pesticide and agriculture policies of the World Bank and the UN Food and Agriculture Organization.
- CU's 1990 report on recombinant bovine growth hormone, Biotechnology and Milk: Benefit or Threat?
- In 2004, he co-authored Pharmaceutical Rice in California: Potential Risks to Consumers, the Environment and the California Rice Industry.

References

- 1 http://consumersunion.org/pdf/bios/NY_hansen_michael_fbio_2006.pdf
- 2 [Consumers Union 2012 990 Tax Return, Guidestar.](#)
- 3 <http://www.activistcash.com/person/1568-michael-hansen/>
- 4 [So far, no evidence links mad-cow to milk supply, by Judith Blake, The Seattle Times, January 28, 2004](#)
- 5 http://www.organicconsumers.org/articles/article_25317.cfm
- 6 [Panel calls for more data on animal cloning risks, By Gilcrest, Laura, Food Chemical News, November 10, 2003](#)
- 7 <http://www.fda.gov/NewsEvents/MeetingsConferencesWorkshops/PastMeetingsWithFDAOfficials/ucm3>
- 8 http://journaltimes.com/news/national/consumers-union-joins-bgh-fight/article_8640e176-5e5a-59ff-b961-45f769c118f5.html
- 9 [GENETIC ENGINEERING IS NOT AN EXTENSION OF CONVENTIONAL PLANT BREEDING; How genetic engineering differs from conventional breeding, hybridization, wide crosses and horizontal gene transfer, by Michael K. Hansen, Ph.D., Research Associate, Consumer Policy Institute/Consumers Union, January, 2000](#)
- 10 [Michael Hansen, a Consumers Union scientist, has raised the specter of bioengineered corn causing widespread male sterility \(Bioengineered corn may kill human sperm\), Food Chemical News, 11 March 2002.](#)
- 11 http://www.organicconsumers.org/wto_cancun.cfm
- 12 [Why We Need Labeling of Genetically Engineered Food\], by Michael Hansen, Ph.D. & Jean Halloran, Consumer Policy Institute/Consumers Union, Synthesis/Regeneration \(Winter 1999\)](#)
- 13 http://consumersunion.org/pdf/bios/NY_hansen_michael_fbio_2006.pdf
- 14 <http://www.prweb.com/releases/2013/2/prweb10431432.htm>
- 15 <http://www.organicconsumers.org/gefood/ConsUnion102302.cfm>
- 16 <http://consumersunion.org/pdf/worst1st.pdf>

- [17 http://www.cattlenetwork.com/cattle-news/latest/activist-cattlemen-align-with-anti-beef-activist-groups-113903789.html](http://www.cattlenetwork.com/cattle-news/latest/activist-cattlemen-align-with-anti-beef-activist-groups-113903789.html)
- [18 http://www.brillscontent.com/consumer_reports.shtml](http://www.brillscontent.com/consumer_reports.shtml)
- [19 http://junksciencearchive.com/consumer/consumer_pesticides.html](http://junksciencearchive.com/consumer/consumer_pesticides.html)
- [20 http://www.organic-center.org/reportfiles/GE13YearsReport.pdf](http://www.organic-center.org/reportfiles/GE13YearsReport.pdf)
- [21 http://www.centerforfoodsafety.org/issues/1039/food-irradiation/press-releases/944/legal-challenge-filed-with-fda-to-remove-monsantos-rbgh-from-the-market#](http://www.centerforfoodsafety.org/issues/1039/food-irradiation/press-releases/944/legal-challenge-filed-with-fda-to-remove-monsantos-rbgh-from-the-market#)
- [22 http://www.centerforfoodsafety.org/issues/1039/food-irradiation/press-releases/914/experimental-pharmaceutical-rice-may-pose-serious-health-and-environmental-hazards#](http://www.centerforfoodsafety.org/issues/1039/food-irradiation/press-releases/914/experimental-pharmaceutical-rice-may-pose-serious-health-and-environmental-hazards#)
- [23 http://www.centerforfoodsafety.org/press-releases/2151/nearly-2-million-people-tell-fda-not-to-approve-ge-salmon#](http://www.centerforfoodsafety.org/press-releases/2151/nearly-2-million-people-tell-fda-not-to-approve-ge-salmon#)
- [24 http://www.organicconsumers.org/wto_cancun.htm](http://www.organicconsumers.org/wto_cancun.htm)