US Right to Know (USRTK): Funded by organic industry and vaccine denialists, anti-biotechnology group attacks mainstream science researchers

The U.S. Right To Know (USRTK) was founded in 2014 and formally launched on January 20, 2015 by former Yes on Prop 37 (mandatory GMO labeling ballot measure in California) campaign manager Gary Ruskin and media director Stacy Malkan with seed money from the Organic Consumers Association.

Its donor list includes organizations well known for supporting fringe medicine and activist causes. The backbone of its funding has come from the Organic Consumers Association, according to government documents. OCA aligns itself with organizations promoting homeopathy and alternative medical cures, such as Mercola.com. Its founder, supplement kingpin Joseph Mercola, partners with it on various promotions and outreach projects as they share conspiratorial anti-vaccine views. According to an investigative piece in The Daily Beast in November 2021, USRTK is intertwined with this network of ‘science rejectionists’:

Filings with the Internal Revenue Service and the state of California show that USRTK launched in 2014 on a $44,500 grant from the Organic Consumers Association (OCA). For the first two years of USRTK’s existence, the Minnesota-based OCA was its lone funder, with contributions swelling as years passed, and totaling more than $1 million in 2021, according to USRTK’s own reporting.

OCA founder Ronnie Cummins, who has also advanced 9/11 “truther” narratives, co-authored a book with 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.”

Its other major donors known for supporting fringe activist causes include the alternative-medicine promoting Dr. Bronner’s Family Foundation and the Westreich Foundation, which has bankrolled multiple anti-vaccine, including the National Vaccine Information Center, which experts have long called “the most powerful anti-vaccine organization in America.” [see below for details of dollars contributed).

Co-director Gary Ruskin has used money from the Laura and John Arnold Foundation to fund two academic researchers at Jesus College in Cambridge, UK as a way of getting his “research” printed in academic journals, which USRTK then cites as examples of mainstream science support for their views. It also limits scrutiny by journalists as it circumvents FOIA (Freedom of Information Act) disclosure requirements in the US. According to professor and journalist David Zaruk:

In 2018, US Right to Know paid European academics 134,000 USD to publish their campaign material in journals. They did not disclose to whom and how much, but merely provided a list of their “peer-reviewed articles” and their activist media amplifications on a page called Academic Work. They even paid to get the anti-vaxx, anti-5G freelancer Paul Thacker to publish a viewpoint in the BMJ on the evils of Coke (to which a correction was later issued.
attacks on agri-business

USRTK operates under the tag line “Exposing what the food industry doesn’t want you to know” and engages in anti-corporate attacks on agribusiness, the food industry and their supporters alleging unethical, lobbying and political influence on issues linked to GMOs, pesticides, sweeteners, and marketing to children.

Over the years, URTRK had sent Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) demands to dozens of public universities, targeting more than 40 scientists and science advocates, including Kevin Folta, Bruce Chassy, Richard Goodman and the GLP’s Jon Entine. According to mainstream scientists and many social scientists and journalists, the USTRK is using FOIA requests—each state has its own version echoing the federal law—to harass and intimidate scientists.

Ruskin acknowledges that is his goal. “The records disclosed … will be used in preparation of articles for dissemination to the public,” according to the text of one record request obtained by Science Insider. But Gary Ruskin, USRTK’s executive director, put a blunter point on it when he told the Insider that the group is “especially looking to learn how these faculty members have been appropriated into the PR machine for the chemical-agro industry.”

“The agri-chemical industry has spent $100 million dollars in a massive public relations campaign,” Ruskin also has said. “The public has the right to know the dynamics.” The implication is that the scientists are working too closely with businesses who support genetically modified, or GM, foods.

As the Columbia Journalism Review has noted:

While open records requests are designed to protect press freedom, they also make it possible for people who oppose certain scientific viewpoints to exploit them. Ideologically driven record requests to public universities, coming from both the right and left, are often purposefully designed to disrupt research. This is nothing more than bullying, according to a new report from the Union of Concerned Scientists, which advocates for a measured approach to open records, with a more discrete definition of which requests serve the public good and which do not.

After her forced departure from Reuters in 2015, reporter Cary Gillam, who is known in mainstream media circles for her perceived biased reporting targeting agricultural biotechnology and her links to anti-biotechnology activist groups, was hired by USRTK as “research director.” She portrays herself as fighting for the cause of transparency in the food and agricultural industries. She has spent much of her time supporting the litigation efforts of the tort lawyers executing the glyphosate lawsuits. USRTK is paid by the tort lawyers to transcribe the proceedings, which are then used in their litigation efforts and by USRTK to publicize the litigation efforts.
USRTK has written a slew of attack blogs against organizations and people it believes are supportive of agricultural biotechnology—scurrilous insinuations that are frequently circulated on social media and occasionally picked up by mainstream journalists, some of whom are unaware of USRTK’s history, funding sources and ideological orientation. Among its targets are numerous distinguished scientists, such as Nina Fedoroff, former president of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, University of California-Davis plant scientist Pamela Ronald, researchers at the Cornell Alliance for Science and University of Florida professor Kevin Folta, a central target of USRTK.

Folta posted an infographic analysis of a blog attack by USRTK co-founder Stacy Malkin illustrating what he believes are the deceptive tactics used by the anti-GMO group. (Click here for enlarged version.)

It’s also targeted journalists, including distinguished science reporters Mark Lynas, Jon Entine, Keith Kloor and Tamar Haspel [for the entire list, click here]. Haspel in particular was aggressive in a point by point response [Let’s talk about journalism ethics — mine and HuffPost’s] to an attack article that ran in the Huffington Post, written by Paul Thacker, a contract writer for USRTK with a controversial history. The many false and misleading representations made against Entine include allegations that the GLP works closely with Monsanto, which is belied by the internal Monsanto documents subpoenaed by the tort lawyers in the case and posted on the USRTK website, which no formal or informal cooperation between the GLP and Monsanto. USRTK and its writing team also falsely claims that the GLP was set up and funded by Monsanto and continues to get ‘dark money’ payments from the Bayer subsidiary—a statement
the USRTK team knows is false, as lawyers in the Monsanto deposed company executives about this and subpoenaed documents [see page 19 of USRTK released document].

The organization is a 501c3 tax-exempt organization formed in 2014 (granted status October 2014); however, the website was first registered in 2012 (see below) while both
Ruskin and Malkan were working for the Yes on Prop 37 ballot initiative campaign. The website became live in January 2015.

On January 20, 2015, it released a report on what it calls “Big Ag”, outlining what it says is the “seedy business” of Big Food, which it claims hides behind “slick PR campaign[s] on GMOs”.

**Organization Details**

Address: 6026A Harwood Avenue, Oakland, CA 94618.

Incorporated 5/2/2014 California Number: C3672501 as a “Domestic Nonprofit” by Gary Ruskin at the above noted residential address using the phone number (415) 944-7350.[1] This address is the listed residence for an “Anna M. Neave” of Berkeley, Arcata and Oakland, California.[2] EIN Tax id: 465676616[3]

USRTK website first registered in 2012 – using privacy protection service:

Domain ID:D165523202-LROR; Domain Name:USRTK.ORG

- Created On:10-May-2012 20:29:30 UTC
- Expiration Date:10-May-2015 20:29:30 UTC
- Sponsoring Registrar:GoDaddy.com, LLC (R91-LROR)
- Registrant ID:CR112536331
- Registrant Name:Registration Private
- Registrant Organization:Domains By Proxy, LLC
- Registrant Street1:DomainsByProxy.com
- Registrant Street2:15111 N. Hayden Rd., Ste 160, PMB 353, Scottsdale, Arizona, 85260
- Registrant Email:USRTK.ORG@domainsbyproxy.com

**CAMPAIGNS / ACTIVITIES**

The group is seeking “whistle blowers” who are “insiders” with the food industry, political, legislative or regulatory bodies to expose “hidden crimes or scandals” related to the food and agriculture industries.[4] The co-founders and board members have a history of litigation targeting corporations and collaboration with litigators suing corporations.

**Attacks on Trade, Farm and Professional Groups**
USKTR has published critical profiles of trade and advocacy groups which support conventional agriculture and non-organic farmers in their “Hall of Shame” – which includes attacks on the Grocery Manufacturers Association, U.S. Farmers and Ranchers Association, International Dairy Foods Association (IDFA), the American Beverage Association (ABA), the Center for Consumer Freedom and the Calorie Control Council.

**Academic Intimidation**

In addition to its FOIA campaign and writing critical public profiles on trade, professional and farming organizations, USRTK has published attacks on individual academics who publish content favorable on GMOs and conventional agriculture. It has published articles attacking Stanford University Hoover Institute fellow Henry Miller and filed numerous freedom of information related requests at state universities demanding the correspondence and related materials from academics who have published pro-plant biotechnology research.

Penn State University emeritus professor Nina Fedoroff, also a target of USRTK, has likened the group to climate denialist advocates. “USRTK’s attack is reminiscent of ‘Climategate’, where the release of private emails did immense, unwarranted damage to the reputations of climate scientists. Now the vocal anti-GM lobby appears to be taking a page out of the Climategate playbook.”

**KEY PEOPLE**

- Co-Founder and Executive Director Gary Ruskin
- Co-Founder and Media Director Stacy Malkan
- Research Director Carey Gillam [agriculture reporter fired from Reuters, 2015]
- Contributing writer: Paul Thacker [critiques here, here]

**Board of Directors**

- Juliet Schor, chair – sociology professor at Boston College and anti-corporate author who promotes a global move towards organic and non-toxic agriculture.
- Charlie Cray, board member – research director at Greenpeace USA and board member Center for Corporate Policy with Andrew Kimbrell. Cray was a policy analyst and the director of the Center for Corporate Policy in Washington, D.C. He was also the former director of the Campaign for Corporate Reform at Citizen Works and a former associate editor of Multinational Monitor magazine. In 2010 he led efforts behind lawsuits against two chemical companies and their public relations firms (Ketchum and Denzenhall Associates) alleging they engaged in corporate espionage against Greenpeace.
- Lisa Graves, board member – executive director of the Center for Media and Democracy, publisher of anti-corporate Source Watch.
FUNDING SOURCES

From their founding through 2015, the only donor reported by USRTK was the Organic Consumers Association, with a noted grant of $46,000 originally posted to their website in February 2015, updated to $164,500 (September 2015), updated to $234,500 (February 2016), and updated to $442,500 (June 2017).

In 2016, USRTK also added organic anti-GMO marketing CEO David Bronner’s Dr. Bronner’s Family Foundation’s with a noted $15,000 in support updated to $108,000 in 2017. USRTK claims to list all “major donors”—defining them as those who donated more than $5,000.[14] The USRTK 2014 IRS form 990[15] claimed only $46,525 in income; suggesting OCA was likely their sole contributor.

In 2014, USRTK’s only reported expenditures were two grants of $22,000 and $15,000 to undisclosed recipients; and salary paid to Gary Ruskin of ~$22,500. USRTK added CrossFit Foundation $50,000 and Westreich Foundation $17,500 in 2017 to their site.[16]

USRTK’s disclosed “major donors” as of 2020:[17]

- Organic Consumers Association: $1,007,500
- Laura and John Arnold Foundation: $392,600
- Bronner’s Family Foundation: $350,000
- Westreich Foundation: $110,000
- Ceres Trust: $70,000
- Schmidt Family Foundation: $53,800
- CrossFit Foundation: $50,000
- Panta Rhea Foundation: $20,000
- Community Foundation of Western North Carolina (Little Acorn Fund – M): $25,000

Organic Consumers Association’s 2014 IRS 990[19] reported two grants to USRTK of $40,000 and $6,250 — so they accounted for 99.4 percent of USRTK’s income (all but $275). The majority of OCA’s income ($1,042,000) that year came from only four large donations ($690,000; $212,000; $155,000; and $85,000) from four undisclosed donors.

Note that in 2014 OCA raised $558,000 via phone bank fundraising, for which it paid $418,000. As a result, the group’s “grassroots” donor contributions were only $0.25 per $1.00, and thus not a significant portion of its overall net income sources (less than 10%). The remainder came from a much smaller number of large, undisclosed corporate and foundation donors. These major donors included “Dr. Bronner’s Family Foundation”—which is funded by Bronner profits and donations from other organic industry trade partners.

USRTK’s activities formally began in 2012 or before; however, they have not disclosed any financial information for years prior to 2014, and claim on their IRS tax returns that they “planned” and “began some activities” but did not complete any projects in their first year, while building their website.[20]
USRTK’s IRS form 1023 filing seeking tax exempt status noted they received US$100,025 in 2014 followed by $200,050 in income in both 2015 and 2016.[21] Note that OCA reported only $86,250 in donations and USRTK tax filings on form 990’s in 2014 – leaving about $14,000 in sources not reported (USRTK claims to report all donors over $5,000).

In 2017 USRTK noted paying an unnamed person $40,200 for “writing and research” in Europe.

**AFFILIATIONS**

The USRTK launch was promoted by the Food Babe Vani Hari on January 20, 2015.[12]

**CRITICISMS**

- Science Magazine writer Keith Kloor reports a campaign to use freedom of information requests targeting academics at public institutions by USRTK is the same intimidation used by climate skeptics: “The tactic is familiar in another controversial area, climate science, where researchers have faced an avalanche of document requests from climate change skeptics… Researchers worry they will also have a chilling effect on academic freedom.”

- University of California scientists Alison Van Eenennaam called USRTK’s FOIA campaigns, “It seems like a fishing expedition…. I am very worried correspondence is going to be used to sully the reputations of scientists… Your first inclination … is to stop talking about the subject. “But that’s what they want. And I don’t want to be intimidated.”

- University of Florida researcher Kevin Folta says, “Unfortunately, when you skim through the 70,000 e-mails I have … USRTK will find opportunities to pull out a sentence and use it against me… They will show I have 200 e-mails from big ag companies. While it is former students … or chitchat about someone’s kids, it won’t matter. They’ll report, ‘Kevin Folta had 200 emails with Monsanto and Syngenta,’ as a way to smear me.”

- Union of Concerned Scientists commented, “Open records requests are increasingly being used to harass and intimidate scientists and other academic researchers, or to disrupt and delay their work. … Academic institutions and other involved parties need to be prepared to respond to these requests in a way that protects the privacy and academic freedom of researchers while complying with the law and respecting the public’s right to information.”
• Carey Gillam a Rachel Carson for our Time, by David Zaruck, Risk Monger, 10/10/2017 – “Gillam was indeed a journalist from 1998 until 2015 for Reuters, who, after repeatedly attacking Monsanto in her articles, was fired from the news organisation. As any good conspiracy theorist would maintain, Carey believes that Monsanto got to Reuters and was responsible for the sudden end to her journalism career. See an article that looks into this period The USRTK spotted the opportunity and directly employed Carey to lead their Monsanto witch-hunt.”

• How Russia and NGOs collude to damage American exceptionalism, by Henry I. Miller and Jon Entine, Daily Caller, 07/19/2018 – “These activists regularly trot out a litany of false accusations about their targets, with university professors as frequent victims. The most notorious of these “hit groups” is U.S. Right to Know, or USRTK, which pretends to be part of a grassroots movement, but is actually mostly funded by the pernicious Organic Consumers Association.

• Organic industry funded NGO accused of colluding with Russia, by Stephan Neidenbach, Medium, May 23, 2017 – “Gary Ruskin, director of US Right To Know (US RTK), is being accused of working with the Russian government to discredit scientists in the United States…. On a larger scale, “USRTK and RT both share a common agenda: To undermine American science and technology for financial gain. Gary gets more money from organic activists, and Russia worries less about competing against America’s multinational agriculture companies,” according to ACSH…”

Resources

• USRTK on Twitter

References

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• 7 Right to Know FOIAs Profs Who Wrote for Pro GMO PR Website, by Gary Ruskin, USRTK Press Release, February 11, 2015
• 8 http://www.bmwguggenheimlab.org/what-is-the-lab/people/advisory-committee/juliet-schor
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