

Business Spectator

Commentary

11 Comments

A damaging ploy by GM denialists

David Leyonhjelm

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One of the biggest complaints made by advocates of action to reduce global warming is that the sceptics disregard the science. In support they point to the majority of climate scientists who believe human activity is causing global warming.

It is quite hypocritical, therefore, for the same people to be so reluctant to accept science when it comes to agriculture and food production. They have, it seems, two versions of science – one that supports their views and one that does not. In other words, the science is used to support a predetermined opinion rather than the basis upon which the opinion is formed.

Such hypocrisy often seems more entrenched in Europe, where anti-fast food and pro organic lobbies are government subsidised and the merits of food processing, food irradiation and genetically modified food are hotly disputed notwithstanding abundant scientific support including most food scientists.

But it seems we are catching up. Those lobbies are certainly present here, and now the multinational activist group Greenpeace has imported one of its favourite European tactics – destroying plots of genetically modified crops.

This has been common in parts of Europe for some years now. Indeed, it has got to the point where trials are conducted in secret if they are conducted at all. In France, those who rip up GM field trials are often acquitted of any offence, despite the huge damage they cause.

Adding to the absurdity, just across the border in Spain, farmers have commercially grown insect-resistant GM maize for the past 12 years and just this month the Spanish government declared it to have had no negative effects on flora or fauna.

The Greenpeace attack on CSIRO's wheat trials strikes at the heart of scientific inquiry. Not only is Greenpeace uninterested in the merits of the GM wheat, it actively opposes finding out. By contrast, it strongly endorses CSIRO research to support its position on climate change.

Its attitude is comparable to that of the animal rights radicals who attacked the homes, cars and business premises of the shareholders and employees of UK companies which use animals in medical experiments and pharmaceutical testing. The perpetrators set out to stop it at any cost.

Although field trials of GM crops are almost non-existent in most of Europe, this does not prevent them from occurring elsewhere. So, in the short term local European farmers and communities miss out on the economic benefits of the trials, while in the long term farmers are being left further and further behind, as Europe imports more of its food from countries in which science is more influential.

The environment misses out too. Most genetically modified crops are either insect resistant or herbicide resistant. Insect resistant crops obviously require less insecticide applications, while herbicide resistant crops require less soil tillage. Both are unequivocally beneficial to the environment.

The wheat destroyed by Greenpeace was being investigated by the CSIRO for altered starch composition, in the hope that it would contribute to greater dietary fibre intake. This would be valuable to all sorts of people, including those with bowel disease and diabetics who require low GI diets.

In all likelihood it is totally safe to eat, just as the GM crops already grown around the world are safe. There has not been a single case of harm to humans or the environment attributable to GM food since it first became available in 1994.

The action by Greenpeace will inhibit the development of crops that increase the sustainability of farmers and raise their productivity. Ultimately, that will limit the production of more food, thus increasing its price and forcing more people into marginal survival. That will increase food security tension, potentially leading to trade barriers and conflict between countries.

The attacks on medical researchers in the UK, which severely inhibited the development of new therapies to reduce illness and suffering, shows this to be true. Some projects were abandoned, scientists and laboratories incurred the cost of extra security, and some projects were moved to other countries.

There are other examples of how rejecting agricultural technology can have adverse consequences. One is the recent outbreak of E coli food poisoning in Germany, which led to 35 deaths and thousands made ill. This is now known to have originated in bean sprouts grown on an organic German farm that shuns modern farming techniques.

E coli are ubiquitous in nature but using manure rather than chemical fertiliser certainly increases the risk. And although the risk could have been eliminated if the sprouts had been irradiated prior to sale, food irradiation is another subject on which Greenpeace has strong views despite what the scientists say.

*David Leyonhjelm works in the agribusiness and veterinary markets as principal of **Baron Strategic Services** and **Baron Senior Placements**.*

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Mark Gordon wrote:

I think this article certainly overestimates the scientists for GM – and there are plenty who are convinced of the need to take a cautious approach (See *A damaging ploy by GM denialists*, July 20). This is a classic Pandora's box.

More importantly, consumers will not knowingly touch the stuff and therefore no European supermarket dare stock any product with even a trace of GM. Finally, we do not need it to feed the world. We have had the ability to do that for decades but choose not to. The planet as is can easily feed a population of three times the current levels. Finally, Greenpeace's biggest success has been the outing of Monsanto as the worst of American 'money before anything' corporations. It is irrelevant if this is actually the case anymore because the consumer in the most important markets 'know' it to be true – and in case anybody forgets, the customer is always right.

20 Jul 2011 7:09 PM

Laura Kelly, Greenpeace wrote:

Many voices speaking on behalf of billions of dollars of vested oil company and agribusiness interests have been out in force since Greenpeace's action to remove a GM wheat experiment from a field in the ACT.

The longest bow being drawn by opponents of Greenpeace's work is that Greenpeace's opposition to GM wheat is 'anti-science' and aligns us with climate deniers. This is far from the truth.

Greenpeace's position on GM crops, like our position on anthropogenic climate change, is based on a thorough and ongoing evaluation of scientific literature. Independent scientific research has raised the potential dangers of growing genetically modified organisms in open fields and the risks of introducing genetically modified foods into the human food chain. This has led to GM crops being rejected by the EU and a number of other countries – but not by Australia.

The key difference between the science on climate change and the bulk of GM science pushed in Australia is who pays for it and whose vested interests it promotes. The science on climate change has led to urgent calls for action that will curb big polluter profits, for the benefit of the Australian public, our planet and future generations. The science on GM on the other hand, is paid for by industry and calls for urgent action to increase industry profits.

We feel the efforts made by David Leyonhjelm to reify 'science' and claim it for the GM industry in his recent opinion are unsurprising. As head of Baron Strategies, Leyonhjelm's clients include Nufarm, Dow Chemicals, Bayer, Dupont, and the CSIRO.

Greenpeace took action to remove GM wheat experiments from the field because we believe the CSIRO's dependence on corporate funding has compromised the integrity of the CSIRO's GM research. We believe this has led to massive risks being taken in Australia's GM wheat trials. Freedom of Information requests pertaining to health, safety and ethical parameters denied as 'commercial in confidence.'

Anyone with a commitment to critical thinking, regardless of their politics, should be asking why Australia is careening down a path of GM wheat commercialisation that has been rejected by all of our major wheat export market competitors, even North America – and why inquiry in support of critical thinking and transparency, should be immediately called 'anti-science' that transports the unsuspecting inquirer directly into the company of Lord Monckton.

20 Jul 2011 7:19 PM

Madeleine Love wrote:

The most disturbing aspect of Leyonhjelm's argument is the implicit assumption that GM regulation and the material supplied to support the applications of the patent holders is somehow equivalent to climate science (See *A damaging ploy by GM denialists*, July 20).

In the Nature Biotechnology journal article "Under Wraps" by Emily Waltz, we learn of the extensive restriction of independent research on GM crops by the patent holders. There is very little independent research critiquing commercially planted GM crops and their safety. I know of no-one in Australia paid to do this work. The Norwegian Group "GenOK" says it is the only truly independent GM laboratory in the world www.genok.com INBI at the Uni of Canterbury NZ is another lab critiquing GM.

Most researchers working within the GM field are working on product development. Traavik from GenOK estimates this proportion to be in excess of 95 per cent. He describes this as a democratic problem.

In addition to the near absence of critiquing science there is a serious issue with the assessment of the human and environmental safety of GM crops by regulators.

After four years of analysis I'm understanding now that GM regulatory food approval science is no more than the lowest common denominator science that serves the interests of global trade. I believe our food regulator engages in what I've now termed "trading science" – standards for science as determined by an economic trading body, the OECD. The science that assesses GM crops is neither cutting edge, state of the art, rigorous or thorough. Nor independent.

It's not climate science, but the enterprise of corporations with long records of human and environmental harm.

20 Jul 2011 7:40 PM

Tim Burrow wrote:

We all have selective hearing or selective acceptance of information that suits us. Good to have it logically pointed out to us from time to time! As Agriculturists it's important we keep the end goal in mind 'feeding the world' (See *A damaging ploy by GM denialists*, July 20).

20 Jul 2011 8:11 PM

Greg Walker wrote:

These activists deserve to be roundly condemned: GM crops are urgently needed to

meet rising food demands, and vandalism can only mean that more poor people on this planet will go hungry (See ***A damaging ploy by GM denialists***, July 20). We are already falling behind in this task, and agricultural research is not adequately resourced.

Our politicians are failing us by not pushing this harder, preferring to pontificate and take the high moral ground. They did the same thing with stem cell therapy too. They need to get out of the way and not deny the benefits of such research to our fellow humans.

20 Jul 2011 9:14 PM

Luke Sampson wrote:

Fantastic article, David (See ***A damaging ploy by GM denialists***, July 20). If only more people could see through the noise that Greenpeace and others put out there to detract from the real benefits that technological advancements are providing to agriculture and consumers then the world would be a better place.

20 Jul 2011 9:45 PM

Max Lewis wrote:

These are certainly emotive issues (See ***A damaging ploy by GM denialists***, July 20), and the best way forward is through open public debate with authoritative persons representing both sides. Then the audience can evaluate the facts and discount the mantras and emotion. Perhaps through Facebook, or another worldwide public forum.

21 Jul 2011 10:38 AM

Matthew Turner wrote:

A welcome window of clarity on the haphazard and disorganised world of the green movement (See ***A damaging ploy by GM denialists***, July 20). I am genuinely unsure about GM crops as I can't comprehend the potential downside risk.

However, I am open-minded enough to ask for proof that it will not have unintended negative consequences before condemning it.

To me, this analysis has parallels that can be applied to analysing the Australian Green Party as well. A disorganised bunch of career objectors (plus a few latecomers who are there because they couldn't run for anyone else) who have congregated under one banner, seeking confirmation of their beliefs from whatever obscure and unbelievable sources.

The Greens will be found out for what they are in the next few years – a party of people who have combined for convenience, who do not have a set of common beliefs based on reality or logic.

21 Jul 2011 1:28 PM

Jefrey Bidstrup wrote:

Great article. I think Greenpeace has become the multi-national organisation with the ethics it claims the biotech companies have (See ***A damaging ploy by GM denialists***, July 20).

Greenpeace founder Dr Patrick Moore has described Greenpeace as "eco-extremist". This is a publicity stunt aimed at raising fear and money from an unsuspecting public who generally regards them favourably for their earlier efforts. This will tarnish what shine the brand has left, and by that negatively impact on saving the whales. They have a superior attitude that treats farmers (like me) as idiots who cannot make up their own mind. I find that offensive.

21 Jul 2011 1:48 PM

Sam Dohle wrote:

Are we supposed to all eat bean sprouts? The world is reaching its limits of agricultural production and GM is the next way forward to increase production, food security and reduce our impact upon the environment (See ***A damaging ploy by GM denialists***, July 20). There is no way we could feed three times as many people under current practices. And as for the "we have the ability but choose not to" comment, How does this happen? Farming is a very costly business and we certainly don't have the ability to give away what we produce. A good article, thank you.

21 Jul 2011 1:57 PM

Henry Cox wrote:

Although I agree with the sentiments regarding unlawful action, made by David Leyonhjelm in his article (See ***A damaging ploy by GM denialists***, July 20), he has unfortunately failed to note an important counter-argument critical to the 'known harm to date' aspect of his remarks. Plants have enormous amounts of DNA and as they have evolved, they have used this vast data base to code for various molecular structures including proteins, lipids, alkaloids etc. Over the course of human evolution we have found that certain plant species are useful to us, particularly as sources of nutrition. Our bodies have adapted to recognise the various components of these plants, absorb and/or dispose of waste materials in the metabolic process. My understanding is that one of the major concerns of some of the leading scientists in this debate is that because a single gene doesn't work alone and codes in combination with others when even a single new gene is introduced to a plant it may code not just for the beneficial intended consequence, but also for other proteins and other structures which are not recognisable by our cellular machinery and which run the risk of damaging us if they can't be dealt with by the body in the usual ways. Unfortunately, evidence of this damage may take generations

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<http://www.businessspectator.com.au/bs.nsf/Article/food-GM-security-Greenpeace-France-Germany-destroy-pd20110720-JX2ZF>