

MEDIA BACKGROUND

**UNDER STRICT EMBARGO UNTIL
00.01 GMT ON NOVEMBER 12, 2014**



THE LETTER FROM AMERICA

“Through our experience we have come to understand that the genetic engineering of food has never really been about public good, or feeding the hungry, or supporting our farmers. Nor is it about consumer choice. Instead it is about private, corporate control of the food system.”

– quote from the Letter from America

What is The Letter from America?

The Letter from America project is a unique open letter to the citizens, politicians, and regulators of the UK and the rest of the EU about the hazards of genetically modified crops. It details the problems and challenges America has experienced in the nearly two decades of growing and eating genetically engineered crops and is a plea not to follow the US example when it comes to GMOs.

The Letter will be officially launched on November 12th, with a full page ad in *The Times* newspaper as well as a digital billboard across the concourse or Waterloo Station – the UK’s busiest railway station. The previous day, on November 11th, the letter will be hand delivered to Number 10 Downing St by a high profile delegation which will consist of chef Valentine Warner and fashion designer Vivienne Westwood as well as Beyond GM director Pat Thomas, and US campaigners Pamm Larry (Label GMOs) and Diana Reeves (GMO Free USA) who assisted on the project and MPs Zac Goldsmith and Michael Meacher.

The full version of the letter with all the signatories will also be held on its own website www.theletterfromamerica.org

Who has signed it?

The letter has been signed by NGOs, academics, scientists, anti-GM groups, celebrities, food manufacturers, and others representing around 57 million Americans (1). These include;

- Organic Consumers Association – a group that represents more than one million consumers in the US
- Friends of the Earth, US – representing more than 300,000 members
- Food and Water Watch, representing some half a million members
- Physicians for Social Responsibility, with 50,000 members
- Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy (IATP)
- The Citizens Trade Campaign a coalition of groups with more than 12 million members
- The Sierra Club – an environmental organisation with 2.5 million members across the US
- The Rachel Carson Council – internationally recognised experts on pesticides
- Dr Bronner’s Magic Soaps – the internationally recognised organic soap brand

- Alice Waters – Chef, author and pioneer of the local eating movement in the US
- Activist and attorney, Robert Kennedy Jr
- Actresses Susan Sarandon, Daryl Hannah and Frances Fisher
- Fashion designer, Tommy Hilfiger

What does it say?

The fully referenced letter details the problems and challenges that American farmers, consumers and others have faced over the nearly two decades since the first commercialized genetically engineered crops were planted.

These include:

- Lower yields than equivalent non-GM crops
- Higher chemical inputs and seed prices that are 3-6 times higher than conventional seed, leading to lower profits for farmers
- The risk of cross pollination and contamination of non-GM fields and the loss of export and organic markets due to high levels of contamination
- Increased pesticide use; research suggests that farmers who planted Roundup Ready crops use 24% more herbicide than non-GMO farmers planting the same crops
- Superweeds and superbugs that are resistant to either Roundup or the toxin produced by Bt plants
- Destruction of the natural environment including threats to beneficial insects such as bees and butterflies and harm to important soil organisms
- Studies showing numerous threats to health from eating GM foods and their associated pesticides.
- Lack of scientific consensus on the safety of GMOs
- Increasing corporate control over the food supply

Who is behind it?

The letter was coordinated in the UK new UK campaigning group, Beyond GM (2) and in the US by campaigners Pam Larry (3), the instigator of the landmark Proposition 37 labelling initiative in California and Diana Reeves (4) who founded the award winning GMO Free USA. Both these women will be in the UK during the launch and are available for interview.

The situation in Europe

The UK and the rest of the EU have yet to adopt GM crops in the way that America has, but this could all be about to change. We are currently under tremendous pressure from governments, biotech lobbyists, and large corporations, and international trade negotiations such as the TTIP (5) to loosen restrictions on the planting and import of GM crops.

In addition, the EU coalition that has blocked the planting of GM crops for so many years, has broken up. It is likely that in January 2015 the European Parliament will vote to allow Member States to make their own decisions on the planting of GM crops.

However, GMOs don't respect geographical borders and yet there is no solid provision for what might happen if GM crops in one country cross-pollinate with those in another.

Likewise, guidelines for opting out are very narrow and even require Member States to seek the consent of biotech companies before opting out. For these and other reasons, oversight at EU level is considered crucial to maintain tight control over the planting of GM crops.

The situation in the UK

If EU legislation on Member State opt out is passed the UK government would almost certainly give the green light to the planting of commercial Roundup Ready (RR) GM crops, engineered to withstand repeated spraying with the herbicide glyphosate. This could happen in the next 6 -18 months.

If and when Roundup Ready oil seed rape, and eventually wheat (and maybe other cereals), comes along and is taken up by our farmers, the use of Roundup and other herbicides will increase dramatically, as it has done in the Americas, where most GM crops are currently grown.

This will lead to major problems affecting biodiversity and, critically, to an increase in residues of glyphosate, the active ingredient in Roundup, and AMPA, its breakdown product, in a range of foods. We are already seeing an increase in detected residues in bread and cereal products.

The need for an engaged and informed public

In the nearly two decades since the first GM crops were planted a very visible public and media campaign has helped keep GM crops from being planted in the EU.

Poll after poll continued to show that people in the UK want this country to remain GM Free.(6) Indeed there are already GM-Free commitments from the Welsh & Scottish governments.(7)

And yet, as GM has fallen off the public agenda, supermarkets have begun to stock products made with GM ingredients as well as meat, milk and eggs from animals fed on GM feed – without labelling.

The Letter from America is a first step in re-engaging the public in this vital discussion about our collective food future.

What's next for the Letter?

The letter will sit on its own website and will continue to attract endorsements from groups but also individual citizens in the US post publication.

In the UK it will be part of a larger campaign to reignite grassroots interest and involvement in the issue of GMOs here and UK visitors to the website will be encouraged to send the letter to their elected representatives with their own concerns. The website will have a facility to make this easy for them to do.

- ENDS-

For more information, interviews and photos, please contact:

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Notes for Editors

(1) The letter from America has been signed by groups representing some 57 million American members/supporters. This figure is based on self-reported membership figures or where a group is social media-based, its current number of supporters.

(2) Beyond GM (www.beyond-gm.org) is a new campaigning organisation run by a campaigner, author, journalist and former editor of the *Ecologist* magazine, Pat Thomas; co-founder of the Organic Research Centre, and coordinator of the Citizens Concerned About GM website, Lawrence Woodward; and an ex-BBC reporter and journalist, and communications consultant Francesca Price. Its aim is to revitalise GM campaigning in the UK and re-engage the public with this vital issue. Its first initiative GM Free Me (www.gmfreeme.org) has already been launched. More initiatives will follow.

(3) Pam Larry is a former midwife, farmer and business owner who woke up one morning to the idea that it was time to start a movement in California to label GMOs. She got in her car and drove around the state, sparking what would become California's Prop 37, The Genetic Engineered Food Labeling Act of 2012. Although it did not prevail at the ballot box, it sparked a US grassroots movement for labelling GMOs. She is the Director of Labelgmos.org, is Co-Chair of the GMO Action Alliance and a board member of GMO Free USA.

(4) Diana Reeves, a Connecticut mom-turned-activist, founded GMO Free USA in response to a failed initiative to label genetically engineered foods in her home state in May, 2012. Diana was on the fast track at a major accounting firm when her firstborn son was diagnosed with cancer at the age of two. He died before he turned five but Diana has since raised three children. After Diana's family developed autoimmune disease and other health problems, she began to learn about the connections between these illnesses and genetically engineered foods. Her family's health-related challenges, her lack of tolerance for putting children at risk and her anger with untested and unlabelled GMOs have instigated her passion to bring positive change to our broken food system. Diana is the recipient of the 2013 Healthy Child Healthy World Mom on a Mission Award. She is a member of the Steering Committee of the GMO Free Global Coalition (<http://www.gmofreeglobal.org/en/steering-committee>) and Co-chair of the GMO Action Alliance Steering Committee (<http://gmoactionalliance.com/>).

(5) TTIP is the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership. It is a comprehensive free trade and investment treaty currently being negotiated – in secret – between the European Union and the USA. Its aim is to tackle what the Office of the United States Trade Representative understands as “technical barriers for trade”. One of the many risks of TTIP is that US negotiators are using the trade deal to push for the EU to allow more planting of GM crops and more imports of GM food and feed. Because of its lack of transparency and the fact that all negotiations are taking place behind closed doors TTIP offers the perfect vehicle to bypass overwhelming opposition to GMOs by EU citizens.

(6) Polls show the majority of UK citizens do not want GMOs.

What does the public think?

- BBC's Countryfile asked viewers in August 2012 if GM trials should be allowed to go ahead in the UK; [79% said no](#).

- An MSN poll recorded that [67% said they did not want GM crops grown in this country](#).
- A survey by food industry magazine Food Navigator in March 2012 found that [73% said they favoured a ban on GM food in the UK](#).
- The Guardian newspaper reported in January 2013 that [72% of readers said they do not believe GM food is either safe or beneficial](#). In June 2013 it ran another poll – should restrictions on GM crops be relaxed? – [71% said no](#).
- Beyond just the UK a November 2010 European Commission survey found that [the majority of Europeans \(61%\) are opposed to the development of GM food in Europe](#). The survey found Europeans believe that GM food is fundamentally unnatural (70%), is not safe for their health and that of their family (59%), is not safe for future generations (58%), and benefits some people but puts others at risk (57%).

What do farmers think?

- Farmer's Weekly found that 61% of respondents said they "would like to grow GM crops". However 26% of respondents said they "would not cultivate [GM] under any circumstances",
- Even among those who said they would like to grow GM crops nearly a quarter (24%) said they see "no advantage in growing GM crops" – which begs the question of why they would want to grow them in the first place.
- In fact, [only 15% of farmers said they would eat GM](#), and investment in GM was ranked last among farmers' priorities for Government attention.

What do our politicians think?

- The restaurants at the Houses of Parliament have [banned GM food since 1998 as a matter of "consumer choice"](#).

(7) In Scotland "The Scottish Government is opposed to the cultivation of GM crops. The cultivation of GM crops could damage Scotland's rich environment and would threaten our reputation for producing high quality and natural foods. It would damage Scotland's image as a land of food and drink." For more see [Scottish Government Policy on Genetically Modified \(GM\) Crops](#)

In Wales "The Welsh Government takes the most restrictive stance possible to Genetically Modified (GM) crops that is consistent with European and UK law. Our mission is to develop policies to underpin this stance, and to take them forward and convey them in both UK and EU arenas... Wales is a founder member of GM Free Network of Regions, which was established by 10 European regions in 2003. The Network is now made up of 53 European Regions and local authorities. The Welsh Government sits on the Network's steering group. The role of the Network is to share information about the co-existence of GM and non-GM crops. The Network is also trying to introduce GMO-free areas in Europe that are recognized by European law." For more see [Welsh Government Policy on Genetically modified organisms](#).