

Testbiotech reveals conflicts of interest at the European Food Safety Authority EFSA

Call for independent risk research
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Munich

A report presented today by Testbiotech in a media conference in Munich, reveals severe conflicts of interest at the European Food Safety Authority EFSA. The chair of EFSA's expert GMO Panel responsible for risk the assessment of genetically engineered plants, has been working for years with a so-called Task Force group at the International Life Sciences Institute (ILSI). A member of staff from Monsanto heads the Task Force, and all its members are from biotech corporations. ILSI itself states that its Task Force group influenced EFSA standards for the risk assessment of genetically engineered plants. There is evidence in several documents that ILSI did indeed influence the work of EFSA. For example, the authority does not request feeding trials using genetically engineered plants to investigate potential health impacts. The document used to justify this doubtful position is partially plagiarized from an ILSI paper.

"This Testbiotech report can only describe the tip of the iceberg. There is reason for concern that the risk assessment of genetically engineered plants is influenced by the relationship between the GMO panel experts and biotech industry in way that renders it impossible for EFSA to fulfil its task as required," says Christoph Then from Testbiotech.

Two research projects supported by Testbiotech were presented at the media conference in Munich. They show just how important it is that risk research remains independent of industry. In climate chambers, the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology (ETH) in Zurich, Switzerland investigated the reactions of genetically engineered maize to extreme environmental conditions such as heat and drought. Due to ongoing climate change, these conditions are becoming more and more relevant. Genetically engineered maize expressing insecticidal toxin is used in the experiments. "These kind of investigations are decisive for risk assessment. We need to know much more about how changing environmental conditions impact the activity of the technically introduced gene constructs," says the project leader Angelika Hilbeck from the University in Zuerich.

A further research project is finalized and awaiting scientific publication. The methods for measuring the content of the insecticidal protein in genetically engineered plants were compared in a joint test involving several laboratories. Currently, the methods used for this purpose can render widely differing results. The current investigations were conducted with participation of András Székács from the Hungarian Academy of Science and propose a standardized method for the comparable measurement of the toxin concentration in Bt plants.

Besides Testbiotech, the Altner-Combecher Foundation as well as the GEKKO Foundation, the Manfred-Hermesen Foundation, the Foundation on Future Farming and the Society for Ecological Research (Munich) support the projects that were presented.

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