

Biotech industry - hidden influence in Germany

Conflicts of interest at government authorities and German Research Foundation (DFG)

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Munich

A new Testbiotech report reveals some, at least partially, hidden networks enabling the biotech industry to influence state authorities and research institutions dealing with genetically engineered plants. The authorities involved include the German Federal Institute for Risk Assessment (BfR), the research institutes of the German ministry of agriculture (BMELV) and a committee at the German Research Foundation (DFG). The report identifies 17 experts with conflicts of interest. Some of the experts are in public positions of major relevance while at the same time holding crucial positions in industrial networks. Most of the experts made wrong or at least insufficient declarations about their personal interests.

“It seems to be normal for most of the experts not to declare their affiliations with industry even if these connections are quite evident. At the same time there seems to be no political interest in taking measures against conflicts of interest. Consequently, there can be no trust in the independence of German authorities when it comes to the risk assessment of genetically engineered plants,” says Christoph Then drawing a conclusion for Testbiotech. “This looks like an attempt to systematically influence state authorities and public opinion.”

Timo Lange for the German NGO LobbyControl says: “The Ministry for Consumer Protection must define clear rules on transparency and the prevention of conflicts of interest. Experts from state authorities involved in the risk assessment of specific products should not be allowed to have close contacts with the producers of those products. Consumers have a right to independent risk assessment.”

The International Life Sciences Institute (ILSI) appears to have an influential role within this network. ILSI is based in the US, and funded by the food and agrochemical industry. Gerhard Eisenbrand, for example, is the chair of the Committee for the Risk Assessment of Food Products (SKLM) at the German Research Foundation (DFG), he is a member of the Committee for Genetically Modified Food and Feed at the German Federal Institute for Risk Assessment (BfR) and also a member of the Scientific Board of Scientific Advisors at the BfR. At the same time, he is president and member of the Board of Directors of ILSI Europe. Both Gerhard Rechkemmer and Alfonso Lampen have similar affiliations and conflicts of interest. Gerhard Rechkemmer is head of the Max-Rubner-Institut for nutrition and food. Alfonso Lampen is head of the unit for food safety at the German Federal Institute for Risk Assessment (BfR).

Just recently, the European Food Safety Authority EFSA declared that experts from ILSI were banned from its work on several levels because of conflicts of interest. Furthermore, the chair of the EFSA Management Board had to step down because she will join Gerhard Eisenbrand in a leading role at ILSI Europe. Testbiotech recommends establishing an independent commission to investigate conflicts of interest within state authorities on all relevant levels, and to find out why these networks were able to develop over several years without sufficient political control. Further, if the conflicts of interest as presented in this report cannot be resolved, Testbiotech recommends the relevant panels and committees be discontinued and several of the experts removed from their present positions.

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Corrected version of 25 May 2012. Original version of the sentences changed:

At the same time, he is executive and scientific director of ILSI Europe.

Furthermore, the chair of the EFSA Management Board had to step down because she was designated successor to Gerhard Eisenbrand as head of ILSI Europe.

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Further information: [Link to the report \(in German\)](#) [4]

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Attachment

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[TBT_COI_Germany_2.pdf](#) [6]

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