

Industry influencing authorities and publicly funded risk research in Germany

German government accused of failing to take action

2 February 2015 / Testbiotech today published a report on how the biotech and food industry are influencing risk research and decisions within the responsible German authorities. According to the analysis, even leading experts in German government agencies and institutions dealing with risk research in food safety and agricultural genetic engineering are compromised by conflicts of interest.

In particular, the following German institutions are affected:

- the Federal Research Institutes within the portfolio of the Federal Ministry of Food and Agriculture (BMEL),
- the Committee on Genetically Modified Food and Feed at the Federal Institute for Risk Assessment (BfR),
- the Federal Office of Consumer Protection and Food Safety (BVL), and
- the Permanent Senate Commission on Food Safety (SKLM) of the German Research Foundation (DFG).

"The manifold linkages indicate that the influence of industry reaches far into the authorities and is having an impact on research and risk assessment. However, the German government seems to take the view that it is best to simply deny any conflicts of interest," says Christoph Then for Testbiotech. "It seems that the government accepts that experts who are supposed to be independent are in fact very close to interests of the industry. Apparently, their real independence is not investigated thoroughly. "

The networks have an effect on research policy, risk research and risk assessment, the implementation of research projects, decision-making in politics and on public opinion. At the same time, the dependency of universities on projects funded by industry has increased significantly over time. The report warns that the influence of industry is becoming predominant in the debate on the risks of genetically engineered organisms, and is hindering in-depth investigation of the real risks and potential hazards.

The report follows up on a similar analysis published in 2012, which was the basis of a petition filed in the German Bundestag. The petition failed at the end of 2014, but Testbiotech has evidence that there is still a need for action.

There is an urgent need for regulation at the Federal Ministry of Food and Agriculture (BMEL). This institution is in charge of most of the relevant authorities and research institutes and grants significant funds for research. The Federal Ministry for Education and Research (BMBF), which holds a key position in the funding of research through the German Research Foundation (DFG), is also affected. In addition, the EU Commission has been criticised for failing to make sure that researchers involved in EU risk research projects are sufficiently independent.

Testbiotech recommends a systematic investigation into the influence that industry has within authorities responsible for food safety, a significant improvement in the standards on the prevention of conflicts of interest, creation of more transparency in the selection of projects for risk research and establishment of a participatory processes for publicly funded risk research. In addition, funding for publicly funded risk research should be provided subject to industry paying a compulsory fee. Civil society organisations active in environmental issues and consumer protection should be involved in decision-making on subjects and projects. This would create new financial incentives for diverse, independent and sufficiently critical approaches.

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The report of Testbiotech (in German): www.testbiotech.org/node/1144

The previous report of Testbiotech (in German): www.testbiotech.org/en/node/668

Testbiotech criticizes EU research Project GRACE: www.testbiotech.org/en/node/1138

Additional Information:

EU Ombudsman recently criticizes conflicts of interest at European Food Safety Authority (EFSA): www.ombudsman.europa.eu/cases/decision.faces/en/58868/html.bookmark