

HOW PUBLIC ARE THE PUBLIC RESEARCH LOBBYISTS OF PRRI?

Corporate Europe Observatory

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The UN Convention on Biological Diversity's (CBD) biosafety negotiations have been the target of biotech industry lobbyists and pro-biotech governments from the outset. But some have taken a more subtle approach to their lobbying, hiding their agenda beneath a veneer of public interest. Scrape beneath the surface however and their links to the biotech industry become clear.

One such organisation is the Public Research and Regulation Initiative (PRRI) which appeared on the scene after the first biosafety negotiations under the CBD. Apparently independent from industry, this group claims to represent the "public research sector" – but how public is public research when GM is involved?

PRRI pro-GM lobby group

The CBD is home to the Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety, an international agreement designed to protect biodiversity from risks posed by the international trade in GMOs and testing and growing them in the open. The Biosafety Protocol follows the precautionary principle, claims equal standing with the WTO, and establishes prior informed consent of importing countries, i.e. the right to say no to GMO imports.

This article exposes how PRRI and its members have close ties to industry and promote a similar agenda to industry, including promoting Terminator technology and GE trees. PRRI claims to represent 'public researchers' in modern biotechnology, but the question is how much it represents the public interest. Previously funded by industry and industry-linked "NGOs", it is now the European Commission that is backing PRRI lobbying efforts financially.

Established in 2004, PRRI's stated aim is to involve "the public research sector in regulations relevant to the development and application of biotechnology". As such, PRRI claims to represent "tens of thousands researchers in several thousand research institutes in developing and developed countries" – although its membership appears to include just around 225 scientists.

PRRI's aim in getting involved in the Convention on Biological Diversity meetings is to: "inform the

negotiators about the objectives and progress of public research in modern biotechnology, to bring science to the negotiations, and to inform the negotiators about concerns public researchers may have."

In 2006, at the third Meeting of the Parties to the Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety (MOP 3), in Curitiba (Brazil), PRRI brought more than 40 representatives, mostly picked from the developing world promoting similar goals to those of the industry. When parties meet for MOP4 and COP9 in Bonn this month (12-30 May) PRRI lobbying efforts will target any action taken by the CBD against genetic technologies such as "Terminator" seeds and genetically modified trees. They will also be hoping to influence negotiations on issues such as liability, agricultural biodiversity and the consideration of socio-economic concerns in biosafety policy.

Leading members of the PRRI team in Curitiba included former Monsanto man, Gerard Barry, and Piet van der Meer, who worked for governments but has been strongly criticised for his industry bias. Willy de Greef, a PRRI steering committee member, was recently elected as the new Secretary General of EuropaBio, the European biotech industry association.¹ PRRI make much of its status as a "public sector" and "not-for-profit" stakeholder, but in reality, most public-sector research into agricultural

¹ www.europabio.org/articles/PR-SecGenDEGREEE-FINAL150408.pdf

biotechnology is heavily aligned with industry, and there is a long history of collaboration with agribusiness multinationals and significant dependence on commercial funding.

PRRI's aims are also to promote public research into genetically modified organisms (GMOs) and, in particular, to counter the "misconception" that GM crops are "the exclusive domain of a handful of big, western multinationals." Yet, in the past PRRI opposed to any changes in the rules which would give the public greater rights. Indeed, it opposed a proposed amendment to the Aarhus Convention (the United Nations Treaty covering Access to Information, Public Participation in Decision-making and Access to Justice in Environmental Matters) which would extend the rights of the public to participate in decision-making on GMOs. These "public researchers" while seeking a far bigger voice for themselves, do not want the public to have a voice.²

Who funds PRRI?

According to its website, PRRI has received funding from the US, Canadian, Spanish and Swiss governments, industry (including CropLife International, Monsanto and the US Grain Council) and "non-governmental organisations" (NGOs).

These "NGOs" include the Rockefeller Foundation, the International Service for the Acquisition of Agribiotech Applications (ISAAA), the Black Sea Biotechnology Association (BSBA), the Donald Danforth Plant Science Centre (DDPSC), and the Syngenta Foundation. Many of these so-called NGOs are closely linked to industry and in some cases are organisations industry has set up. The board of the Syngenta Foundation, for example, includes Syngenta directors. The ISAAA (International Service for the Acquisition of Agri-Biotech Applications) was established to promote biotech crops in developing countries and is itself funded by a large number of corporations. The Danforth Center, where PRRI held its formal launch, was established by Monsanto "and academic partners" with a \$70-million pledge from the company. Monsanto also donated the 40-acre tract of land, valued at \$11.4 million, on which the Center is built.

² GM Watch, 13 March 2006, www.gmwatch.org/archive2.asp?arcid=6336

The single biggest funder of PRRI is however the European Commission. Under the Sixth Framework Programme, Food quality and Safety, the European Commission has provided US\$800,000 for a three-year PRRI project on "Global involvement of public research scientists in regulations of Biosafety and Agricultural Biotechnology" known as Science4BioReg.

The PRRI Science4BioReg project aims to address the "growing gap between public sector life sciences in agricultural biotechnology on the one hand and regulatory policies and public perceptions on the other". Also, it aims to involve public researchers in discussions on international agreements and regulations related to GMOs.

The Science4BioReg project includes setting up a web-based database. Science4BioReg hopes that the information they collate in their web-based database could feed into the European Commission's SINAPSE e-Network (Scientific INformation for Policy Support in Europe).

The project also seeks to influence international and regional agreements, particularly the Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety, EC Directives and regulations and the Aarhus Convention. PRRI plans to organise meetings with the EU institutions and establish cooperation with the Commission's Bureau of European Policy Advisers (BEPA), in particular with those dealing with life sciences, biotechnology, and research and development³. In other words, EU funding is being given out to lobby for what are essentially private, not public interests.

During MOP4 in Bonn, PRRI teams up with "Biosafenet" for a side event on risk assessment research. Biosafenet is also an EU-funded project, aimed to promote European participation in biosafety research initiatives conducted at an international level. They exchange experts and information and coordinate communications and thus can be expected to share positions.⁴ For example, PRRI's Piet van der Meer also has a seat on the Biosafenet advisory board.

PRRI's activities are clearly allied with the private sector, and many meetings are jointly organised.

³ <http://pubresreg.org>

⁴ www.anbio.org.br/upmr/Science4BioReg_DoW_20-10-06.pdf

The regional meetings for example held ahead of the upcoming CBD meeting in Bonn were organised in collaboration with AfricaBio, a South Africa based biotech stakeholders organisation in Africa, and with the European Federation of Biotechnology (EFB) in Europe – a body which brings together companies, biotech associations, universities and research institutions.

PRRI members' links with industry

A number of PRRI members have close links to industry. As stated above, Dr. Gerard Barry, who is now an employee of the International Rice Research Institute, was formerly a research director at Monsanto. PRRI chairman, **Prof. Phil Dale**, works at the John Innes Centre, a research centre which receives tens of millions of pounds in funding from big biotech corporations. And PRRI member **Roger Beachy**, is founding president of the Danforth Center, set up and funded by Monsanto, along with other biotech companies, as well as former co-chair of the scientific advisory board of the Akkadix Corporation, a global agricultural biotechnology company.

Willy de Greef, until recently a PRRI member, was former global head of regulatory affairs for Syngenta until 2002, then becoming director of his own private consultancy. De Greef left PRRI in April 2008 to become the new Secretary General of EuropaBio, the European biotech industry lobby group, where he sees his challenge as *“to overcome society’s fear of change and convince decision makers to welcome innovative improvements”*.

Syngenta, De Greef’s former employer, has been a key player in the Global Industry Coalition which has represented the biotechnology industry during the Biosafety Protocol negotiations.

De Greef was involved in an early initiative to give a voice to “public researchers” when the Global Industry Coalition brought together a panel of researchers in 1997 during the course of the Biosafety Protocol negotiations. Although unsuccessful, this appears to have provided a model for PRRI – with the crucial difference that the researchers are now presented as wholly independent of industry.

Piet van der Meer, another key player in PRRI, is married to a lobbyist for the Global Industry Coalition (a lobby group of biotech and seed corporations with a special focus on the Biosafety Protocol), Laura Reifschneider. Piet van der Meer was involved in negotiating the Biosafety Protocol, ostensibly as a non-partisan expert, but others found him far from impartial. Dr Tewolde Berhan Gebre Egziabher, Chair of the Africa Group at the Protocol negotiations, described him as the most unfair of the chairs in the negotiations. *“Many of our delegates were, understandably, not very fluent in English. He used to make them sound as ridiculous as he could by finding fault with how they said what they said, instead of focusing on the content,”* he recalled. *“Sometimes he championed ideas, disregarding the fact that he was chairing.”*⁵

Piet van der Meer went on to be Programme Manager at the United Nations Environmental Program-GEF Projects on Implementation of National Biosafety Frameworks where he was also criticised for his industry bias. He eventually quit.

Dr **Steven Strauss**, co-chair of the PRRI working group on genetically engineered (GE) trees, is director of the Tree Biosafety and Genomics Research Cooperative (TBGRC – previously known as TGERC) at Oregon State University and is a well-known advocate of the commercial benefits of genetically engineered trees.

Members of TGERC, who contribute to research through financial and in-kind contributions, have included Arborgen, the world’s biggest forest biotechnology company – currently running field trials with GM poplar, eucalyptus, pine, sweetgum and cottonwood trees⁶; the paper and packaging group Mondi and paper company Potlatch. Recent work on GE trees has been funded by the US Departments of Agriculture, Energy and Agricultural Research Service (ARS), together with Arborgen.

“That someone who has been funded by the likes of Weyerhaeuser, Monsanto and International Paper passes himself off as a publicly funded researcher is an affront to real publicly funded research.” Anne Petermann, Co-Director of Global Justice Ecology Project.

5 GM Watch, 13 March 2006, www.gmwatch.org/archive2.asp?arcid=6336

6 www.wrm.org.uy/bulletin/82/trees.html

Other examples of PRRI members and industry links

PRRI member **Kelebohile Lekoape**, was formerly South African Assistant Director of Genetics at the National Department of Agriculture and was instrumental in drafting the South African GMO Act. Lekoape was manager for Monsanto South Africa regulatory affairs in 2001 and has represented the biotechnology lobby group AfricaBio.⁷

Charles Mugoya was on the PRRI delegation in Curitiba for MOP3 in 2006 and represented the USAID-funded Association to Strengthen Agricultural Research in East and Central Africa (ASARECA), which facilitates collaborative research. According to the African Centre for Biosafety (ACB), the Association's principal aim is to foster regional acceptance of GM through weak biosafety regulations.

Dr. Florence Wambugu represents "A Harvest Biotech Foundation International", Kenya on PRRI and is a well-known GM advocate who trained with Monsanto. "A Harvest" is backed by CropLife International. Dr Wambugu is also a DuPont Biotech Advisory Panelist, was twice winner of Monsanto's Outstanding Performance Award and became the first Director of the AfriCentre of the International Service for the Acquisition of Agri-biotech Applications (ISAAA), based in Kenya.⁸

Prof. Jaroslav Drobnik, a PRRI member from the Czech Republic is also well-known as an advocate of genetic engineering in the Czech Republic, giving lectures, writing articles and doing lobby work. He has acted as a consultant to Monsanto. He is also involved in the pro GE organisation, Biotrin – which disseminates information about biotechnology.

PRRI member, **Dr. Ervin Balazs**, from the Department of Applied Genomics Agricultural Research Institute in Hungary, is one of the country's most outspoken GMO supporters. He joined the Agricultural Research Institute following its controversial deal with Monsanto to genetically modify Hungarian bred corn varieties. The Institute had been considered a flagship of traditional plant breeding in Hungary, and the deal led to fears that Monsanto would have access to Hungarian corn germplasm. Dr. Balázs is also a key figure in the Zoltan Barabas Biotechnology Association – an organisation representing geneticists and industry in Hungary .

Prof. Elena Badea from the University of Agricultural Sciences in Timisoara, Romania, is an

7 www.edmonds-institute.org/html/directory-61.html

8 www.mindfully.org/GE/2004/Florence-Wambugu-Wambuzle12jano4.htm

advocate of GM in Romania and a member of PRRI. While head of the Romanian Biosafety Commission, she spoke out in favour of GM potatoes following a Ministry of Environment decision to reject field trials. She has been involved in a number of research contracts between Monsanto and the University in Timisoara.

PRRI member **Prof. Atanas Atanassov** from Bulgaria is involved with the Institute for Genetic Engineering, which undertakes projects for companies including Monsanto and Pioneer. He is also Executive Secretary of the Council for the Safe Use of Genetically Engineered Higher Plants, where he plays a key role in granting permits to companies, like Monsanto, to release GMOs. According to ANPED, Prof. Atanassov was also involved in preparing Bulgaria's new draft legislation on GMOs.⁹ The draft law has been criticised for not following the precautionary principle, as advocated in the Biosafety Protocol.

Various PRRI members, including Prof. Atanassov, Yaroslav Blume, Elena Badea and Marc van Montagu¹⁰ are signatories to the "Yalta Declaration" – an agreement made in 2006 supporting the use of GMOs, investment in agricultural biotechnology and better intellectual property protection. The declaration was also signed by Monsanto, the European Federation of Biotechnology and the ISAAA.

PRRI lobbying on liability, GURTS and GM trees

Liability and redress

From the outset of the Biosafety Protocol and much to the dislike of the biotech industry, a working group was installed to establish rules on liability and redress compensating for damage done by GMO trade. At MOP4, the issue cannot be postponed any more and parties are expected to take action. NGOs demand that the "genetic polluter pays", and that in case of GM contamination, both farmers, traders and consumers would be compensated. This would naturally pose a huge economic risk to the biotech industry.¹¹

9 "Bulgaria: The Corporate European Playground for Genetically Engineered Food and Agriculture", ANPED and EcoSouthWest, 2000

10 www.bsbanet.org/doc/kucha/yalta_declaration_2006.php?ln=en

11 www.greenpeace.org/international/press/releases/biotech-industry-impunity-fuel

PRRI claims that the biotech industry is a low-risk industry and argues against mandatory insurance or funds based on the principle of the polluter pays. It told a UN meeting in Colombia this year that: “modern biotechnology is not an activity with inherent risks, such as transport of hazardous chemicals,” claiming that: “after over ten years of growing GMOs commercially on over hundred million hectares, and after tens of thousands of field trials, there are no verifiable reports of damage to biodiversity or human health.”¹²

PRRI also argues that it is “essential” that modern biotechnology is used to deal with challenges such as population growth, environmental degradation, climate change, and loss of natural and arable land.

In fact, PRRI argues that: “A disproportionate liability mechanism can seriously hamper technology transfer and important public research without adding anything to safety. This would do much injustice to future generations, especially in the poor developing countries that are being marginalized in a highly globalised world.” While some marginalized and impoverished communities might be surprised to find they had champions like PRRI, such positions among biotech corporations are not new.

GE trees and GURTS

Both GE trees and Terminator seeds (also called Genetic Use Restriction Technologies, GURTS) are key issues at COP9/MOP4. At its 2006 Conference of the Parties (COP-8), the CBD made a decision recommending parties to take a precautionary approach with regard to GE trees. Also, COP 8 upheld the COP-5 moratorium on the release and use of Terminator technology from 2000 – a genetic modification that disrupts germination of farm-saved seeds and prevents seed saving making farmers dependent on seed corporations.

PRRI is an eloquent advocate of the benefits of public research into genetically engineered trees

noting that it can “often addresses crop species whose value, scale, or production cycle does not meet the financial objectives of corporations.” It adds that: “research that does not guarantee near term financial benefits; can span long time scales that go beyond normal financial and product cycles...”¹³

It also argues that public research engenders more “transparency”, “so that biosafety and value elements can be fully scrutinized and thus trusted”.

Public funding for high risk, high cost research is also of course extremely beneficial for the biotech companies, who gain essential research and credibility, paid for with public money. This diversion of public funds into research that serves private interests is an increasingly common problem.

PRRI is opposed to a ban on GURTs (Terminator Technology) instead saying that it should be considered on a case by case basis. Indeed it argues that it may bring potential benefits such as: “improving food and feed production, health care for all people and environmental protection”. At the COP-8 meeting in Curitiba, the PRRI-statements on GE trees and GURTs were always in line with and supportive of the respective statements of the USA and the agro-biotech industry.

PRRI’s backing for GURTS, echoes the argument put forward by the industry that terminator technology is not aiming to stop farmers from re-using seeds, but is a way of promoting co-existence and avoid cross-pollination with non-GM crops. According to PRRI, GURTS are important to allow the co-existence of plants engineered for “specific uses, such as for food, industrial rapeseed, biofuels and even plant-made vaccines”. PRRI argues that field trials of terminator seeds should not be ruled out under the Convention on Biodiversity decision (V/5 section III) which they say should be seen as requiring regulation under national laws.

¹² http://pubresreg.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=blogcategory&id=28&Itemid=39

¹³ PRRI’s publicity for its side event at SBSTTA, Rome, February 2008

CBD Decision V/5 section III:

“Recommends that, in the current absence of reliable data on genetic use restriction technologies, without which there is an inadequate basis on which to assess their potential risks, and in accordance with the precautionary approach, products incorporating such technologies should not be approved by Parties for field testing until appropriate scientific data can justify such testing, and for commercial use until appropriate, authorized and strictly controlled scientific assessments with regard to, inter alia, their ecological and socio-economic impacts and any adverse effects for biological diversity, food security and human health have been carried out in a transparent manner and the conditions for their safe and beneficial use validated. In order to enhance the capacity of all countries to address these issues, Parties should widely disseminate information on scientific assessments, including through the clearing-house mechanism, and share their expertise in this regard”¹⁴

Following the European Parliament’s April 2008 vote supporting a precautionary approach to the use of GURTS and a moratorium on genetically engineered trees at the CBD, PRRI chairman Marc van Montagu wrote to the EP expressing his concern. He told MEPs that by referring to the precautionary approach, they had given: *“the wrong impression [that] there are inherent threats of serious or irreversible damage connected to the use of these technologies. Such a view has no scientific basis.”*

“GURTs can complement isolation, male sterility, crop rotation, etc., to allow co-existence of diverse crops and traits.”, Van Montagu states. The final EP resolution however remained unchanged.¹⁵

Excerpt EP resolution:

– *“whereas the last CBD COP reaffirms the application of the precautionary approach to the use of Genetic Use Restriction Technology (GURTs) and recommends that field trials and commercial use should not be approved”*
– *“ensure that COP 9 adopts a final decision to ban all terminator technologies (GURTS), and agree a moratorium on the environmental release, including field trials, and commercial use of genetically modified trees”*

14 www.banterminator.org/Glossary/Moratorium

15 www.europarl.europa.eu

Proving the benefits of GM?

PRRI has put a lot of effort into making the case for GM crops, also at other international fora. PRRI was well represented in the “International Assessment of Agricultural Knowledge, Science and Technology for Development” (IAASTD), an intergovernmental process to evaluate agricultural knowledge, science, and technology.

In March 2008, PRRI wrote an open letter to the organisations and governments involved in the production of the International Assessment of Agricultural Science and Technology for Development (IAASTD) expressing its concern about the final draft chapter on genetic engineering. In it they advocate: *“Any solution that can be put into the crop seed; higher productivity, enhanced nutrition, disease and insect resistance, resistances to inexpensive herbicides, drought tolerance, increased fertilizer use efficiency, etc., lessens costs of inputs as well as decreases environmental impact and provides the consumer with a better product at lower cost.”* Engineering the seed is the way to deal with agricultural issues, rather than addressing the whole system. PRRI proposed that the whole chapter be re-written.

With some background knowledge of the IAASTD process, this letter is much more than a simple complaint of frustrated GE crop lobbyists. It is the recognition that PRRI was not able to present GE crops in a positive light during the IAASTD process. PRRI was certainly one of the best-represented organisations in the assessment. Three of its former or current members were named as authors for the various IAASTD documents: Joel Cohen, Theresa Sengooba and Idah Sithole-Niang.

In addition to this strong representation of GE crop promoters, the biotech industry was given ample opportunity to influence the report by submitting their information and documents. However, after scrutinizing the additional evidence presented by both PRRI and the biotech industry on GE crop benefits and their future potential, the other IAASTD scientists and experts were apparently not convinced that this evidence met the quality standards to be included, as it was more about interpretation of the available data, rather than overlooked information.

Conclusion

PRRI and its members have many links with industry and a strong agenda to promote genetic engineering as safe and acceptable, including promoting Terminator technology and GE trees. PRRI claims to represent 'public researchers' in modern biotechnology, but the question is how much it represents the public interest. MOP delegations should be aware of this when being lobbied by PRRI representatives. The European Commission should be asked why it grants public funds to an organisation with close ties to commercial interests in biotechnology, to lobby biosafety negotiations.

