

# Countering Pro-GMO Deceptions and Falsehoods. Genetically Engineered Crops are not Safe

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Global Research, June 02, 2016

Region: [Europe](#)

Theme: [Biotechnology and GMO](#),  
[Environment](#), [Media Disinformation](#),  
[Science and Medicine](#)

*In his [recent piece](#) for The Times newspaper in the UK, Viscount Matt Ridley argues that a [new report](#) from the American National Academies of Sciences (NAS) leaves no room for doubt that genetically engineered crops are as safe or safer, and are certainly better for the environment, than conventionally bred crops.*

*Ridley adheres to the belief that GM technology reduces insecticide use and speculates that future GM crops will be even safer, better for the environment and better for human health. He says that it is a disgrace that Greenpeace still campaigns against Golden Rice, a vitamin-enhanced variety that its backers claim could save hundreds of thousands of lives a year.*

According to Ridley, opposition from rich westerners adds to the cost of bringing such crops to the market, which he argues restricts the spread of GM technology.

In discussing the labelling of GM food in the US, Ridley argues this leaves consumers with the impression that there is something wrong. He argues that the recent NAS report makes the point that genetic engineering is a method, not a category of crop, and it makes no sense to single it out for special labelling because regulation should be based on traits, not techniques. Ridley implies, therefore, that GM is no different from food that is boiled or roasted as its actual content remains unaffected.

Ridley finishes by saying the NAS report points out that “emerging genetic technologies have blurred the distinction between genetic engineering and conventional plant breeding to the point where regulatory systems based on process are technically difficult to defend.”

With a good dose of industry-inspired PR flurry, he concludes that because gene editing in particular will soon allow scientists to improve crops in ways that have none of the even theoretical risks that critics highlight, if Europe does not embrace biotech plants now, its agriculture will wilt.

Unfortunately, for readers of The Times, Ridley’s piece is the usual concoction of misrepresentations, falsehoods and blunders we have come to expect of pro-GMO puff pieces that rely on flawed sources and reports.

His major blunder is to have accepted at face value the NAS report.

Ridley basing his piece on a flawed NAS report

The NAS is compromised by the serious conflicts of interest within the NAS and its research

arm, the National Research Council (NRC). Even studies relied upon by the NAS to show GMO safety are authored by people with conflicts of interest.

Indeed, the new [report](#) by Food & Water Watch “Under the Influence: The National Research Council and GMOs” highlights the millions of dollars in donations received by the NAS and NRC from biotech companies.

On its website, GMWatch [discusses](#) the Food & Water Watch report, which documents the one-sided panels of scientists the NRC enlists to carry out its GMO studies and describes the revolving door of its staff directors who shuffle in and out of industry groups. The report also shows how it routinely arrives at watered-down scientific conclusions based on industry science.

Some 11 out of the 19 members of the NRC committee listed in the NAS report have ties to the GMO industry or to pro-GMO advocacy. The two reviews of animal data relied on by the NAS to claim GMO safety are authored by people who also have conflicts of interest (an analysis of these reviews and why they are misleading is [here](#)).

Readers are advised to read the Food & Water Watch Report to see for themselves the massive conflicts of interests that Ridley either remains ignorant of or wishes to gloss over in order to push a pro-GMO agenda.

GMWatch notes that the NAS committee member chosen to speak about the food safety aspect of the report to the online magazine [The Conversation](#) was Michael A. Gallo, emeritus professor of environmental and occupational medicine at Rutgers University. Gallo is a regular pro-corporate commentator who in 2004 defended farmed salmon in the wake of research showing it contained high levels of toxic PCB chemicals.

In his piece for The Conversation, Gallo makes false and misleading statements, which are apparently designed to reassure the public about the safety of GM foods. For example, he says that any changes seen in GMO feeding experiments were “within normal ranges”. GMWatch states that this is an unscientific statement of a type often used to [dismiss](#) significant differences found in GM-fed animals compared with the non-GM-fed controls and goes on to highlight how pro-GM scientists make “a nonsense of the scientific method” and to come up with conclusions designed to mislead.

GMWatch concludes:

“It is well established that conflicts of interest affect scientific outcomes and conclusions in every field that has been investigated, from tobacco to pharmaceuticals to GM crops and foods. The public deserves better than the NAS’s biased attempt to convince the public that GMOs are safe.”

It is not the first time advocates for GM like Matt Ridley have used flawed reports to push for this technology and to attempt to pass off tainted sources as ‘independent’ and thus beyond reproach (see [this](#) and [this](#)).

Readers may also wish to read [these commentaries](#) on the NAS report.

Rosemary Mason’s 44-page open letter response to Ridley

Matt Ridley's piece in The Times may be regarded as part of the government's on-going push to get GMOs into Britain and a timely intervention as the debate about glyphosate in the EU reaches a head. The final vote on renewing the licence for glyphosate use in the EU will take place on 6th June 2016. The British Government is supporting the European Food and Safety Authority's assertion that it doesn't cause cancer, despite the WHO saying it is "probably carcinogenic."

In her 44-page open letter (1/6/2016) to Ridley and the editor-in-chief of The Times, Rosemary Mason responds to Ridley's piece by saying, "I think I smell an industry rat."

While Ridley takes about the safety of GM crops and reduced chemical use, Mason rubbishes such claims by referring to Charles Benbrook's [paper](#) on the massive increases in glyphosate use in trends in glyphosate herbicide use in the United States and globally (2016) which states that:

"Since 1974 in the U.S., over 1.6 billion kilograms of glyphosate active ingredient have been applied, or 19 % of estimated global use of glyphosate (8.6 billion kilograms). Globally, glyphosate use has risen almost 15-fold since so-called 'Roundup® Ready'."

If recent evidence demonstrates anything, it is that GM crops and glyphosate use are joined at the hip where industry profits are concerned. GMOs drive the sales of glyphosate.

As if to underline this, referring to Monsanto, Jack Kasky on [Bloomberg](#) reports:

"Chairman and Chief Executive Officer Hugh Grant is focused on selling more genetically modified seeds in Latin America to drive earnings growth outside the core US market. Sales of soybean seeds and genetic licenses climbed 16 percent, and revenue in the unit that makes glyphosate weed killer, sold as Roundup, rose 24 percent."

In the same piece, Chris Shaw, a New York-based analyst at Monness Crespi Hardt & Co states that "Glyphosate really crushed it," implying it was a major boost to Monsanto's profits.

The bottom line is sales and profit maximisation – and the unflinching and defence of glyphosate despite the [cover up](#) of its harm and the effects on communities in Latin America, where cancers, birth defects, infertility and DNA changes since being exposed to GM Roundup® Ready Crops are [reported](#).

Mason draws Ridley's attention to a [recent piece](#) in the New Eastern Outlook. William Engdahl discusses the relicensing of glyphosate in the EU by stating:

"What is amazing about the entire ongoing battle over glyphosate re-approval is that opposition and awareness that the EU Commission is willing by any means possible to bow to the chemical industry glyphosate weed-killer cartel and approve a probable carcinogen, is growing by leaps and bounds, and internationally. That awareness is in turn bringing light to the very dark corners of the world of GMO itself, something that Bill Gates, David Rockefeller, Monsanto, Syngenta and friends are none too able to withstand. To date the EU Commission has received a staggering 1.5 million citizen petitions demanding

they not re-approve glyphosate. The opposition to EU Commission approval of glyphosate has taken on a self-expanding character and that has the agribusiness weed-killer cartel alarmed. The process is exposing to the general public, for the first time in such a clear manner, the degree of corruption in not only Brussels but also in the so-called scientific bodies that advise it on what is safe and what not."

Signed by individuals and groups representing 60 million US citizens, Mason also brings the [Letter from America](#) to the attention of Ridley, which warned David Cameron (and the rest of the EU) not to authorise GM crops. It confirmed the devastating effects on human health and the environment. GM is not about public good or feeding the hungry as lobbyists claimed, but about corporate control of the food system. It stated:

"Studies of animals fed GM foods and/or glyphosate, however, show worrying trends including damage to vital organs like the liver and kidneys, damage to gut tissues and gut flora, immune system disruption, reproductive abnormalities, and even tumors... These scientific studies point to potentially serious human health problems that could not have been anticipated when our country first embraced GMOs, and yet they continue to be ignored by those who should be protecting us. Instead our regulators rely on outdated studies and other information funded and supplied by biotech companies that, not surprisingly, dismiss all health concerns. 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 Americans are reaping the detrimental impacts of this risky and unproven agricultural technology. EU countries should take note: there are no benefits from GM crops great enough to offset these impacts. Officials who continue to ignore this fact are guilty of a gross dereliction of duty."

Most of the countries in the EU apart from Britain took that advice and opted out of GM (including Scotland, Wales and Ireland). .

Mason argues that glyphosate is a biocide: it kills life. She knows this from her direct experience on her nature reserve in the UK and cites various sources of evidence to highlight a correlation of the huge loss of biodiversity with GMOs and glyphosate use in the US, the massive adverse impacts on human health and links between herbicide use (including glyphosate) and antibiotic resistance.

In citing a wide array of sources throughout her letter, Mason also highlights the ongoing collusion between academia and biotech companies, not least Monsanto, resulting in fraudulent practices intended to deceive the public and fool it into accepting harmful but highly profitable products.

*Readers are urged to read Mason's open letter to Ridley [in full here](#)*

In it, she outlines how GMOs, glyphosate and the increasingly globalised system of chemical-intensive food and agriculture have led not only to academic fraud but also to an increase in congenital anomalies in the UK, decreased mental acuity and adverse impacts on fetal and child development and a wide range of diseases and illnesses.

And she also takes apart Ridley's claim about GM crops and new techniques being no different from conventionally bred crops and safer (as have [others](#)), highlights various

conflicts of interest within prominent bodies which shape policy and public opinion and addresses the issue of Golden Rice that Ridley also misrepresents in his piece.

### Ideology and self-interest driving the pro-GMO lobby

Whereas Ridley offers a short but prominent newspaper article based on a flawed report, industry-inspired clichés and falsehoods, Mason is compelled to respond with a 44-page, comprehensive and fully-referenced text that pulls together relevant scientific research on GMOs and glyphosate. At the same time, she highlights the corruption and deceptions that have made it possible for powerful commercial interests to destroy the environment and human health for profit.

A [privileged viscount](#) like Ridley, affluent biotech company CEOs, politicians and well-paid career scientists spout [public relations rhetoric](#) and deride critics for denying GM to the hungry poor. However, the pro-GMO lobby relies on [fraud](#), [regulatory delinquency](#), [non-transparent practices](#), [smear campaigns](#), [dirty tricks](#), [the debasement of science](#) and PR messages such as a [trillion meals](#) containing GMOs have been eaten and no one has died or become ill as a result and that '[the debate is over](#)'. Aside from [well-funded slick PR](#), it also relies on [secretive studies](#) and makes baseless claims wrapped up as scientific facts.

And yet it is their critics who are dismissed for supposedly being emotive, unscientific, ideologues driven by self-interest.

In making such accusations, pro-GMO figures attempt to deflect attention from their own [self-interested motives](#), their [hypocrisy](#) concerning their policies towards the poor or their massive political influence.

These people tend to be part of an enclosed world that promotes allegiance to a corporate-dominated paradigm that is intolerant of alternative views. And the result is a certain self-righteousness that leads them to impose their [will and neoliberal ideology](#) on the rest of humanity in collusion with the [machinery](#) and [active backing](#) of national states, while they set out to denigrate [models of agriculture](#) that could sustainably feed much of the world and ignore [those factors](#) (largely fuelled by the neoliberal system they support) that currently create poverty, hunger and food insecurity.

When saying that Europe's agriculture will wilt if it rejects GM, Ridley mirrors the claim made by Owen Paterson that Europe will become a [museum of world farming](#) if it does not embrace GM crops (and, by implication, its chemical inputs). The [evidence indicates](#) that this is nothing more than fear-mongering. Ridley's tone reflects Paterson's [baseless attacks](#) on critics of GM.

Finally, for those who may not be aware, Owen Paterson is a British MP and the former environment minister. Due to his ongoing promotion of GM, fellow Conservative Party MP Zac Goldsmith described him as [a puppet](#) of the biotech industry. He is also Matt Ridley's brother-in-law.

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