

Majority of Members of UK's New GMO Regulatory Committee Have Conflicts of Interest

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A large majority – seven out of eleven, or 64% – of the members of an important new [subcommittee](#) tasked with evaluating the safety of GM foods and animal feed have potential, probable, or definite conflicts of interest, in the form of vested interests in the liberalisation or commercialisation of GM technologies or related products, according to our analysis.

Our finding comes shortly after the publication of an important [paper](#) in Nature Food, the highest ranking journal on food science and technology, which found extensive conflicts of interest in UK regulatory committees on GMOs and other food safety issues. The experts who undertook this analysis point out that conflicts of interest (COIs) are critical to public trust in decision making and conclude that ideally such regulatory or advisory bodies “should not include anyone with COIs that deserve to be declared”.

But in our GMWatch analysis of the [ACNFP PGT Subcommittee on products of genetic technologies destined for food and feed purposes](#), we found that four out of its 11 members have probable or definite conflicts of interest; and three out of the 11 have potential conflicts of interest that need to be clarified. In other words, only four out of the 11 (36%) have no apparent conflicts of interest.

Independent and transparent?

The ACNFP PGT Subcommittee was recently set up under the Advisory Committee on Novel Foods and Processes (ACNFP), with the vital role of conducting risk assessments of GM foods and feed under UK legislation. It reports to the ACNFP and advises the Food Standards Agency (FSA) and Food Standards Scotland.

The ACNFP is [sponsored](#) by the FSA and [calls itself](#) “an independent expert committee”, which is why the issue of conflicts of interest is so important. The FSA is responsible for designing the risk assessment for the UK's new regulatory regime on GMOs, including the

policy on GMO labelling, although it is already [clear](#) that it has no intention of asking for GMO labels on new GMOs.

The ACNFP PGT Subcommittee [met](#) five times in 2022. Much of their business on GMOs is noted in agendas as “[reserved](#)” (or secret, at least for the time being), making a mockery of the FSA’s [claim](#) to act not just “independently” but “transparently”.

Study finds extensive conflicts of interest in UK’s GMO regulatory committees

Our findings on this important new GMO regulatory committee come soon after the publication of a [paper](#) by Profs Erik Millstone and Tim Lang on conflicts of interest in UK food regulatory institutions, including the FSA, the ACNFP, and another GMO regulatory body, the Advisory Committee on Releases to the Environment (ACRE). Millstone and Lang found that each of them included members declaring interests at some point, with some panels having more experts with conflicts of interest than without.

Millstone and Lang based their findings on the declarations of interest of the members of the different committees. They did not analyse the ACNFP PGT Subcommittee, probably because it was formed after they wrote their paper – hence the need for our analysis.

Millstone and Lang found that on the FSA’s Science Council, the proportion declaring conflicts of interest has been rising, and in November 2022 there was a six-to-five majority with such conflicts.

Of the FSA’s five topic-focused committees, all had majorities with conflicts of interest at some stage. At the ACNFP, the “parent” committee of the ACNFP PGT Subcommittee, the proportion of people with conflicts of interest has risen in recent years, with nine out of 16 members (56%) declaring such conflicts in 2020, 11 out of 19 members (58%) in October 2021, and a peak of 14 out of 21 members (67%) in November 2022.

Too close to industry

In GMWatch’s view, a cynic might conclude that the numbers of conflicted people have risen with the UK’s departure from the EU and consequent plans to liberalise GMOs. That said, conflicts of interest on GMO regulatory committees have long been a source of concern. For instance, over two decades ago a UK government minister [pledged](#) to overhaul of the Advisory Committee on Releases to the Environment (ACRE) because there was “a general view that some of the people were rather too close to the industry and rather too pro-GM”.

Despite that, Millstone and Lang found that only one of the seven current members of ACRE declared no conflicts of interest in 2022. The other six (86%) had conflicts of interest with 16 different corporations.

Indeed, our own GMWatch [analysis](#) of March 2022 found that 100% of the members of ACRE have potential or actual conflicts of interest that may enable them to benefit from the weakening of the regulations around GMOs. For our analysis, we expanded our research beyond the members’ own declarations of interest, and termed some conflicts of interest “potential” as well as the more obvious “actual” ones – possible explanations for the small single-person difference in conclusions between us and Millstone and Lang.

Millstone and Lang also found that despite earlier ministerial assurances that those with

commercial conflicts of interest would always remain a minority, by 2008, a majority (nine out of 14) of FSA Board members had active or recent commercial conflicts of interest. The proportion of FSA Board members who declared conflicts of interest peaked in 2008 but subsequently declined. In 2014, the numbers with and without conflicts of interest were equal, but the chair was among those who declared a conflict, and chairs have a casting vote in the event of tied votes. In December 2020, the FSA Board had a five to four majority of those declaring conflicts of interest, but in 2022, three of nine declared them.

Millstone and Lang write, “COIs are important because they may undermine public trust in decision-making and challenge the FSA as it tries to enhance public trust.”

They conclude, “If the FSA, or any such regulatory or advisory body, is completely to eliminate and avoid corporate capture, its board and advisory committees should not include anyone with COIs that deserve to be declared.”

We agree with this conclusion and warn the public that decisions on GMOs reached by the committees examined in this article cannot be assumed to be objective.

Our analysis of the ACNFP PGT Subcommittee

We looked at the interests of the 11 members of the subcommittee, as they themselves declare them on the ACNFP [website](#) and from information available in the public domain, to identify actual or potential conflicts of interest that could compromise the person’s objectivity in evaluating the risks of GMOs.

We define conflicts of interest as vested interests in the liberalisation and commercialisation of GM technologies or products in the areas of agriculture, food, livestock animals, or food processing. “Vested interests” do not necessarily mean financial interests; instead they could be interests related to career progression and professional status.

Key

- No conflicts of interest found: (-)
- Equivocal or potential conflicts of interest: (+ -)
- Probable or definite conflicts of interest: (+)

Members

Dr Andy Greenfield (chair) (-)

Dr Andy Greenfield, chair of the ACNFP PGT Subcommittee, has a [background](#) in medical genetics and animal welfare ethics. He is named as an applicant and inventor on [patents](#) on a gene therapeutic agent for transplant patients. However, as the development, regulation and use of genetic modification technologies in medicine are separate from their use in agriculture and food, and because no government in its right mind would try to deregulate medical uses of GM, neither his patents nor his declared interests on the ACNFP website would appear to constitute a conflict of interest with his role on the Subcommittee. We therefore conclude that we found no conflicts of interest.

Professor Paul Fraser (+)

Professor Paul Fraser is [chair](#) of the management board of [BBSRC-NIBB phase-II High Value](#)

[Biorenewables \(HVB\) Network in Industrial Biotechnology and Bioenergy](#), a public-private [partnership](#) that “actively promotes and facilitates collaboration between academia and industry in the Biorenewables sector”, including facilitating “partnership and knowledge transfer between UK academia and industry”. Within that research programme he has acted as [chair](#) of the management board for the BBSRC-NIBB Network for High Value Chemicals from Plants.

The John Innes Centre (JIC) and the Centre for Novel Agricultural Products, University of York are [represented](#) in the HVB executive group. The JIC is a GM crop research and development [centre](#) that is heavily [oriented](#) towards corporate interests. The Centre for Novel Agricultural Products researches and develops GM plants for agricultural, “phytoremediation” (environmental cleanup using plants) and industrial [uses](#).

The HVB management board [includes](#) Johnathan Napier of the GMO crop development institute Rothamsted Research and Andrew Collis, synthetic biochemistry technical lead of the pharmaceutical company GSK Pharma Supply Chain.

Fraser [reports](#) receiving research funding from the Gates Foundation as well as the agbiotech company Syngenta, which develops GM crops. Bill Gates is “an [evangelist](#) for genetically engineered foods” who predicts that “GMOs will end starvation in Africa” and GMOs can “end world hunger by 2030” and the Gates Foundation [funds](#) GMO research and development projects [worldwide](#).

Due to Fraser’s roles in the BBSRC-NIBB public-private partnership, as well as his funding from the Gates Foundation and Syngenta, he has conflicts of interest in the form of vested interests in the liberalisation of GMOs and should be excluded from the ACNFP PGT Subcommittee.

Professor Wendy Harwood (+)

Professor Wendy Harwood is Head of the Crop Transformation Group at the John Innes Centre, Norwich, where she also manages the BRAC (Biotechnology Resources for Arable Crop Transformation) Crop Transformation/Genome Editing Platform.

In her declaration of interests she lists funding from the BBSRC and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation for projects involving genetic transformation and genome editing.

Due to her role at the John Innes Centre and her Gates funding for GMO projects, Harwood has serious conflicts of interest that should exclude her from serving on an “independent” expert panel on GMOs.

Professor Huw Jones (+)

Professor Huw Jones declares that he is a member of the “EPSO Plants for the Future gene editing working group” and the Plants for the Future European Technology Platform (Plant ETP).

EPSO is a scientist group that is very [active](#) in lobbying at the EU level for deregulation of new GMOs. Sixty-four per cent of the members of the EPSO working group on Agricultural Technologies, which develops opinions in this field for EPSO as a whole, have vested [interests](#) in the commercialisation of new GMOs.

Plant ETP was [set up](#) by EPSO and the GMO industry lobby group EuropaBio in 2004. It [published](#) a report that [advocates](#) “lowering barriers to market access” for “plant-based innovation” via “innovation-friendly” regulation. Plant ETP is [composed](#) of agricultural biotech companies and Copa-Cogeca, the EU representative of national farmer associations. It [counts](#) among its members EPSO and the John Innes Centre, as well as the agbiotech companies BASF, Bayer CropScience, KWS, Keygene, and Syngenta.

EPSO’s and Plant ETP’s activities and corporate links mean that Jones’s roles in the organisations constitute conflicts of interest that should exclude him from the ACNFP PGT Subcommittee.

Dr Ray Kemp (+ -)

According to his declaration of interests on the ACNFP website, Dr Ray Kemp is “a social scientist specialising in risk perception and communication” – notably in matters to do with radiation risks. He is an expert adviser to the International Atomic Energy Agency and a non-executive director of the UK government’s Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (BEIS), which is responsible for nuclear issues, including nuclear waste management, and a member of the Committee on Radioactive Waste Management (CoRWM).

The public might reasonably wonder why, with this background, Kemp is on a committee dealing with GM foods. The website of his former company gives a possible clue. He was managing director of his own [risk communication consulting firm](#), Ray Kemp Consulting Ltd (now [dissolved](#)). The company specialised in “addressing controversial health, safety and environmental issues” about a number of risky and unpopular technologies, including radioactive waste disposal; nuclear power plants; and 5G, mobile phone masts, and smart meters. Since his appointment to the [ACNFP PGT Subcommittee](#), we might add “GM foods” to that list.

The Oil, Gas and Energy Law website informs us of the stance he is likely to take on GM food risks. The website describes his [speciality](#) as “advising on projects, policies and programs where public and stakeholder perceptions of risk differ from the technically assessed levels”. For “technically assessed”, read “claimed by industry and accepted by compliant governments”. The cynical conclusion might be that he is on the ACNFP PGT Subcommittee in order to persuade the public to accept the risks posed by GM foods.

While such a role may not formally constitute a conflict of interest, it seems obvious that in the public interest, this “risk perception and communication” expert should be replaced by someone with a technical understanding of the risks posed by GM foods based on empirical research.

Dr Elizabeth Lund (-)

According to her declaration of [interests](#) on the ACNFP website, Dr Elizabeth Lund is a freelance consultant in the area of research ethics and nutritional study design and is alternate vice-chair of West London Gene Therapy Advisory Committee and Research Ethics Committee.

We did not identify any conflicts of interest for her.

Professor Hans Verhagen (+ -)

Professor Hans Verhagen is a board-certified [toxicologist and nutritionist](#) who is also the owner of his own consultancy business, [Food Safety & Nutrition Consultancy](#), following his [retirement](#) from the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA) in 2020, where he was Head of the Risk Assessment and Scientific Assistance Department, as well as a Senior Scientific Officer.

While toxicological and nutritional expertise is welcome in the ACNFP PGT Subcommittee, Verhagen's consultancy business may put him in an awkward position regarding his duty to serve the public interest rather than that of the GMO developer applicant company. Having served in EFSA for several years, he now offers corporate [clients](#) help and advice on "anticipating the outcome of the evaluation of a dossier by EFSA (based on 9 years of practical experience)" and in "actual building [of] a dossier for an application or for a notification".

A "dossier" is the collection of data that a company wishing to commercialise a GMO must submit to the regulator – in this case, EFSA, but presumably also its UK equivalent, the ACNFP PGT Subcommittee. Could Verhagen find himself in a position whereby in his consultant role, he advises a company how to get its GM food approved, either by EFSA or the ACNFP PGT Subcommittee, even perhaps helping the company compile the dossier, and then in his regulatory role on the ACNFP PGT Subcommittee, evaluates the safety of the same product?

The same or a very similar dossier is routinely used across multiple regulatory authorities, thanks to widespread "regulatory harmonisation" around the globe. So it's possible that even if Verhagen hasn't helped prepare the dossier for submission to the ACNFP PGT Subcommittee, he may have helped prepare it for submission to EFSA. The two agencies may appear to be independent of one another, but any given company could submit substantially the same dossier to both. Alternatively, a company that has been a client of Verhagen's consultancy firm may submit a dossier to the ACNFP PGT Subcommittee on a product that the consultancy firm has not specifically dealt with, but there would still be a conflict of loyalty in that Verhagen would be evaluating the safety of a product made by a company that was, is, or is likely to be in the future, a client of his consultancy firm.

As is often the case with the declarations of interest on the ACNFP [website](#), not enough information is given about these potential conflicts of interest and how they would be managed if a relevant situation arose, for the public to make a judgement about whether Verhagen's consultancy business constitutes a conflict of interest. We therefore provisionally conclude, pending clarification, that he has potential conflicts of interest that mean he should be excluded from the ACNFP PGT Subcommittee.

Professor Bruce Whitelaw (+)

According to his declaration of interest on the ACNFP [website](#), Professor Bruce Whitelaw is the interim director of the Roslin Institute, a BBSRC-funded Institute embedded in the Royal (Dick) School of Veterinary Studies at the Easter Bush Campus of the University of Edinburgh. The Roslin gained fame (or notoriety, depending on your viewpoint) as the place where Dolly the sheep, the world's first mammal to be cloned from an adult cell, was [made](#). Dolly showed signs of accelerated ageing and developed arthritis and tumours in the lung, and had to be euthanised at only six years old. The natural lifespan of a sheep is [10-12 years](#).

Within the veterinary campus at Easter Bush, Whitelaw is [Dean of Research and Innovation](#), Chairman of Roslin Innovation Centre (“the business [location](#) of choice for companies undertaking strategic, commercial and collaborative research in the animal and veterinary sciences”), and a director and non-executive board member of Roslin Technologies Ltd. Roslin Technologies is a private company with the [objective](#) “to advance disruptive biotechnologies to improve protein production”, in particular through lab-grown meat.

The ACNFP website clearly [spells out](#) Whitelaw’s vested interests in GM applications in livestock animals: “Through his bioscience research reflected in nearly 200 scientific manuscripts and 12 patents, he pioneers the application of genetic technologies in farmed animals. He currently focusses on genome editing technology and animal stem cells, aiming to advance novel applications for the agricultural and biomedical communities. He led the recent project to genetically engineer pigs to be resistant to Porcine Reproductive and Respiratory Virus which has been taken forward into the commercial sector by Genus PIC Ltd.”

Due to Whitelaw’s [patents](#) (in the name of Christopher Bruce Whitelaw) and his various commercial interests in GM applications in livestock animals as well as lab-grown meat, he has conflicts of interest in the form of vested interests in the commercialisation of GMO animals and the foods derived therefrom, as well as in GMOs used in food production, such as in lab-grown meat. Therefore he should be excluded from the ACNFP PGT Subcommittee.

Professor Clare Mills (-)

Clare Mills is [Professor of Molecular Allergology](#) at the University of Manchester, where she applies molecular science to understand, better diagnose and treat food allergies. She is [director](#) and a founder shareholder of Reacta Biotech Ltd (mis-spelled as “React” on the ACNFP website), which develops, manufactures and [commercialises](#) oral food challenge materials to pharmaceutical standards for allergy testing.

Mills [carried out](#) unspecified work for the biotech company Solazyme (later TerraVia Holdings, Inc., now defunct), which specialised in food oils and algae products, as well as giving advice on allergens to Pepsico. However, these roles do not appear to constitute any conflict of interest with her role on the ACNFP PGT Subcommittee. We identified no conflicts of interest for her.

Professor Pete Lund (+ -)

Professor Pete Lund is a member of the ACNFP PGT Subcommittee who is “[co-opted](#)” from ACRE (the Advisory Committee on Releases to the Environment, which advises the UK government on the safety and acceptability of GMO releases). He is Emeritus Professor of Molecular Microbiology in the School of Biosciences and Institute of Microbiology and Infection at the University of Birmingham.

The ACNFP website doesn’t give any information on Lund’s interests. However, according to our previous [analysis](#) of conflicts of interest of ACRE members, it appears that he has current career interests in biotechnology applications for various industries.

He “runs an active research [programme](#) funded by BBSRC, the Leverhulme Trust, and the Darwin Trust of Edinburgh”. No details of the programme are given on the University of Birmingham’s website but his research interests are described in general as “how bacteria

respond to different stresses in their environment". It is unclear whether this is GMO work and this should be clarified in his ACRE declaration of interests.

The Darwin Trust was founded with royalties from the American multinational pharmaceutical biotechnology company [Biogen](#), though this funding came to an end in 2020-21. The BBSRC, the UK public funding body for science, has employees from the JIC in its [Pool of Experts](#) and a [Research Committee](#). The JIC, as explained above, is heavily oriented towards corporate interests. This matters because together, the BBSRC's Pool of Experts and Research Committees assess funding applications and thus decide what kind of science or technology taxpayer money will support.

He leads an EU COST Action research project on "understanding and exploiting the impact of low pH on micro-organisms", which is [relevant](#) to "the microbiology of food and drink, many aspects of industrial biotechnology and bio-processing, and clinical and veterinary treatment of infections in a time of increasing antimicrobial resistance".

He also "[runs](#) an active research programme funded by BBSRC, the Leverhulme Trust, and the Darwin Trust of Edinburgh". No details of the programme are given on the University of Birmingham's website but his research interests are described in general as "how bacteria respond to different stresses in their environment". It is unclear whether this is GMO work and thus should be clarified in his ACRE declaration of interests.

Not enough information is given to know for certain whether Lund's interests conflict with his role of assessing GM foods and processes on the Subcommittee, so we can only conclude that he has potential conflicts of interest that require clarification.

Professor Alastair Macrae (-)

Professor Alastair Macrae is a "[co-opted member](#)" of the ACNFP PGT Subcommittee. He is a senior lecturer in Farm Animal Health and Production, and Head of the Dairy Herd Health and Productivity Service (DHHPs), an independent consultancy, at the Royal (Dick) School of Veterinary Studies at the University of Edinburgh. The ACNFP website gives no information about his interests, but his biography on the University of Edinburgh [website](#) shows that he is an animal health expert with a strong interest in nutrition and the diseases of intensive livestock production.

We found no conflicts of interest that could compromise his objectivity on the Subcommittee.

Findings

- No conflicts of interests found: (-) 4 out of 11 members
- Potential conflicts of interest: (+ -) 3 out of 11 members
- Probable or definite conflicts of interest: (+) 4 out of 11 members

According to our analysis of the limited information available on the ACNFP website and elsewhere, four out of 11 members of the ACNFP PGT Subcommittee have probable or definite conflicts of interest, in the form of vested interests in the liberalisation or commercialisation of GM technologies or products in the areas of agriculture, food, livestock animals, or food processing. Three out of 11 have potential conflicts of interest that need to be clarified further. Only four out of 11 have no apparent conflicts of interest.

In total, a majority – seven out of eleven, or 64% of the members – of the ACNFP PGT Subcommittee have potential, probable, or definite conflicts of interest in the liberalisation or commercialisation of GM technologies or products in the relevant areas.

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