

## ANNUAL REPORT 2017 – 2018

This report has been written for the Annual General Meeting of ENSSER members on 5 September 2018 in Berlin. It covers the period from the previous AGM (Athens, 22 November 2017) until the present AGM.

### 1. Conferences and meetings organised

*Critical Scientist Organisations' Meeting (CSOM), Athens, 23 November 2017*

Alongside our AGM in Athens, ENSSER hosted the second annual meeting of critical scientist organisations. Seventeen scientists from ten different organisations took part. In a lively exchange, various plans of the organisations were discussed, as well as current political developments around the new genetic modification (GM) techniques. Perhaps the most important point of the meeting was the discussion of the dismissal of one of the participating scientists from his job, resulting in an initiative to support this scientist (see paragraph 3 below). The meeting was also used to help ENSSER produce a press release linking recent disastrous floodings in Greece to the current state of agriculture, the subject of our workshop held the next day. (The press release, in Greek and English, was picked up widely in Greek media.)

*Workshop "Agriculture & Health: the need for greening Europe - an opportunity for Greece", Athens, 24 Nov. 2017*

This open scientific workshop was organised jointly by ENSSER and the Mariolopoulos-Kanaginis Foundation for the Environmental Sciences, at the initiative of our member Prof. Neni Nicolopoulou-Stamati. The subject was the paradox that agriculture, while feeding us, also damages our health due to its use of pesticides, endocrine disruptors and GM crops. Greece is at a crossroads in the sense that it has not gone very far down the road of industrial agriculture yet and can still make a different choice, while many other European countries need to make a U turn. The workshop consisted of five scientific presentations, a discussion and an informal meeting with members of the Greek parliament.

*Energy Workshop "'A World We Want" within the boundaries of planet earth: Finding a common and scientific fact-based language for the energy transition", Berlin, 13 December 2017*

After long preparation, ENSSER held this workshop as a first attempt to bundle critical scientific voices addressing the dilemma that current sustainable policies are insufficient to realise the energy transition. The workshop was funded by Triodos Foundation and consisted of three larger and four smaller presentations and a discussion. The majority of the fourteen participants were not members of ENSSER, but some of them joined afterwards. There was no consensus on a suitable course of action, but the participants were positive about the workshop and requested ENSSER to organise a second workshop within a few months.

*Networking event "Facing Challenges to Effective Implementation of the Precautionary*

*Principle", Mals (Italy), 5-10 July 2018*

The community of Mals in South Tirol (Northern Italy) has gone through major challenges to achieve a complete ban on pesticides in their municipality. However, the administrative court of Bolzano in June 2018 lifted the ban because it would pose an unreasonable economic loss. The rationale offered by the court is in line with an overall attempt of the corporate lobby to undermine the precautionary principle by replacing a sound scientific risk assessment with a risk-benefit analysis favouring economic arguments over health arguments. Our member Sanjay Kumar made use of a visit of the American lawyer Steven Druker to Europe, by taking him to Mals in order to support the farmers and inhabitants wishing to save the ban. Druker has much experience in exposing the subversion of any kind of precaution by regulators who are supposed to guard public health and biodiversity. He stresses that the precautionary principle is based on sound science. Kumar, Druker and our member Angelika Hilbeck discussed with the Mals inhabitants how they could use scientific arguments to support their cause.

*Debate on the scientific foundations of genetic engineering between Critical Scientists Switzerland and the Swiss Academy of Sciences, Zurich, 27-28 Aug. 2018*

A few years ago, the Swiss Academy of Sciences published a rather biased report on the benefits of genetic engineering (GE). Our member organisation Critical Scientists Switzerland challenged the report and requested a process to bring balance to the Academy. The Academy agreed and funded the debate. ENSSER members Ignacio Chapela, Jack Heinemann and Angelika Hilbeck presented the position that GE is based on a dogmatic paradigm and is not supported by scientific arguments. A correction or addition to the challenged report will be published by the Academy.

## **2. Projects**

- The ongoing research project "[Risk Assessment of GE Organisms in the EU and Switzerland](#)" (RAGES), carried out by Testbiotech (Christoph Then), ENSSER (Angelika Hilbeck), Critical Scientists Switzerland (Luigi d'Andrea) and GeneWatch (Helen Wallace), nears its end.
- The project to assist Prof. Damián Verzeñassi of the University of Rosario (Argentina) in analysing his medical data set of Argentinian people exposed to the herbicide Roundup, is also still running. Our board member Nicolas Defarge and other international experts assist Verzeñassi.
- The project "Gene Drives" started in October 2017 and is carried out by Critical Scientists Switzerland, ENSSER and the Federation of German Scientists. It aims to stimulate the public debate about gene drives in Switzerland and Europe by providing a solid, independent scientific basis of information. To this end, a report is currently being compiled by experts reviewing the available scientific literature. Some delay was experienced in finding experts to write the various chapters of the report. A workshop with the authors then available was held in March 2018 in Emmendingen (Germany); a second workshop will be held from 9-11 September 2018. Gene drives are genetic modifications that are

designed to rapidly spread a trait or a handicap through populations or entire species of animals (e.g. mice, mosquitoes, flies) or plants (e.g. 'weeds', invasive species). They carry a special risk of causing ecological imbalance and disruption.

- The initiative to edit a book on the scientific consensus about GE food at the request of the publishing company of Springer is still running. has asked our prospective member Sanjay Kumar to write or edit a book on the topic of scientific consensus about GE food. Mr. Kumar is doing an MA thesis on this topic at the University of Bielefeld (Germany), making a particular point of the fact that there should be a clear-cut distinction between academic research and the public relations of the industry. He makes a documentary film as part of his thesis and has interviewed a number of experts for this, including some of our members. His project drew the attention of the publisher. The board (notably Hartmut Meyer and Angelika Hilbeck) are supporting Mr. Kumar with advice.

### **3. Support of critical scientist**

At the CSOM (see paragraph 1 above) one of the participating scientists brought up his dismissal from his job, which was formally due to overcapacity but was quite clearly related to his scientific work criticising EFSA's assessments of GMOs and GM food. The scientist in question has an excellent track record and a very good reputation in this field. The academic institute for which he worked had used invalid arguments to dismiss him. The situation at the institute, which used to have a critical reputation itself but has gradually been losing this in recent years, was such that the scientist did not want his job back, but he did want to defend his reputation and if possible be rehabilitated. ENSSER wrote a letter to the board of the institute with a strong defense of his work and a recommendation to reassess the process of his dismissal. It turned out that the board was unable to critically reassess its own processes. The scientist, however, appreciated ENSSER's action very much and felt supported.

### **4. Representations and public interventions**

- November 2017: Ricarda Steinbrecher tours the east coast of Canada with presentations and interviews on the new GM techniques (NGMTs) for EcoNexus and ENSSER.
- 5-8 December, Montreal: Christoph Then takes part for ENSSER and Ricarda Steinbrecher for EcoNexus in a meeting of the CBD's Ad Hoc Technical Expert Group on synthetic biology. (CBD = Convention on Biological Diversity)
- 11-14 December, Montreal: Christine von Weizsäcker, Ricarda Steinbrecher and Antje Lorch take part for Ecoropa and EcoNexus in the 21<sup>st</sup> meeting of the Subsidiary Body on Scientific, Technical and Technological Advice (SBSTTA 21) of the CBD.
- 15-20 December: Our coordinator tries to nominate Ignacio Chapela to the CBD Workshop on Detection and Identification of Living Modified Organisms for Francophone Africa in Tunis, Tunisia, 5-9 March 2018. However, only experts from the countries of Francophone Africa are allowed to give the workshop.
- 31 Januari: Diederick Sprangers visits member of Dutch parliament Tjeerd de Groot (D66, liberal democrat party) to discuss ENSSER's NGMT statement.
- 17 May: Our coordinator proposes Michael Antoniou as speaker at the NGMT hearing of the European Parliament on May 17. Ricarda Steinbrecher speaks for the Green Party.

- 20 February: Our coordinator proposes Michael Antoniou as contact for the Green Party in the EP on the use of gene editing in humans.
- 20 February: Our coordinator submits ENSSER's NGMT statement to the Australian Gene Technology Regulator for the [Review of their Gene Technology Regulations](#).
- 24 February, Rotterdam: Our coordinator holds a presentation about our NGMT statement at the seed fair "[Reclaim the seeds](#)".
- 22 February: ENSSER receives a Freedom of Information request from the Biotech Unit of DG SANTE of the EC for our letter to them of 28 September containing our NGMT statement. Our coordinator replies that ENSSER has no objection to disclosure of the letter.
- 8 March: Our coordinator sends the Dutch version of the NGMT statement to Dutch broadcaster VPRO in connection with a planned CRISPR documentary on Dutch TV on 25 March.
- 23 March: Our coordinator has a skype call with Prof. Jose Julio Ortega, representative of the academic stakeholders on the Stakeholder Bureau of EFSA, to discuss the agenda of the Stakeholder Bureau meeting which he will attend on 18 April.
- April: Ricarda Steinbrecher represents ENSSER in Brussels in a meeting with a former risk regulator of the Belgian government about the decline of risk management in Belgium due to an excess of staff dismissals. The meeting is organised by Corporate Europe Observatory and Greenpeace.
- 13 April: Our coordinator takes part in a telephone conference with other academic stakeholders of EFSA to prepare the upcoming EFSA Stakeholder Bureau meeting, which will be attended by Jose Julio Ortega, representing the academic stakeholders.
- 8 – 15 May: Our members Ulrich Loening, Jack Heinemann, Erik Millstone and Broder Breckling help suggest questions for the NGMT hearing in the European Parliament on May 17.
- 5 June: ENSSER co-signs a statement by 28 NGOs about Horizon Europe (FP9), the ninth research and innovation (R&I) framework programme of the EU.
- June and later: Our board member András Szekács requests an ENSSER speaker for the OECD conference "CRISPRing - a new begin for genetic improvement of plants and microbes" in [Budapest \(Hungary\), from 3-5 September 2018](#). The OECD holds this conference to lobby for genome edited organisms to be exempted from GM legislation. Our member Sarah Agapito volunteers to present the ENSSER NGMT statement at the conference, but she is also needed for a panel discussion which ENSSER organises at the GMO Free Regions conference in Berlin, which coincides with the OECD conference. So unfortunately in the end ENSSER is not represented at the OECD conference.
- 14 August: Our member Irina Castro receives a question from a mainstream Portuguese newspaper asking if there have been any lawsuits in Europe similar to the US Roundup trial, in which Monsanto was ordered to pay US\$ 289 million to a cancer patient. Via our member list Nicolas Defarge points out two similar French lawsuits to her.
- 26 July: Ricarda Steinbrecher represents ENSSER at an NGO meeting with the EU Commission and the Austrian EU Presidency about the CBD. The meeting evaluates the progress of the CBD's SBSTTA (see above, December) and SBI (Subsidiary Body on Implementation) and addresses crucial points for the upcoming Conference of the Parties (COP) of the CBD in Egypt (November 2018).
- July: Our board member András Szekács is re-elected for a second term of four years on EFSA's Management Board.

## 5. Publications

- 17 November: The new paper of our member Jack Heinemann showing that common herbicides cause antibiotic resistance, is announced on our website.
- 30 November: Our member Angelika Hilbeck publishes the article "[The time is ripe for a poison-free agriculture](#)" on GMWatch. A German translation ("[Die Zeit ist reif für eine Landwirtschaft ohne Pestizide](#)") appears on the website of the Federation of German Scientists.
- 21 February: The new [review paper](#) of our member Ulrich Loening on the impacts of glyphosate on crop health and disease resistance is put on our website.
- 22 March: Arnaud Apoteker reports on the member list that Sciences Citoyennes has written the statement "ENGAGING CITIZENS & CIVIL SOCIETY IN DEFINING FP9'S MISSIONS AND MAXIMISING SOCIETAL IMPACT".
- 29 June: Nina Holland of Corporate Europe Observatory publishes [an article on GM lobby group PRRI](#) in relation to the CBD, with input from ENSSER (Angelika Hilbeck) about our experiences in Cancun (COPMOP 2016). The article reveals documents released through a Freedom of Information request, revealing how PRRI unites industry, researchers and regulators in 'like-minded' groups to manipulate the crucial international biosafety talks under the CBD.

## 6. Other activities

### *Intacta lawsuit*

In our lawsuit concerning the incorrect assessment and authorisation for import of Monsanto's Intacta soybeans (Testbiotech, ENSSER and Sambucus vs. EC, EFSA, Monsanto and UK government, started in 2013), a hearing was held about our appeal on 27 June in Luxembourg. Our lawyers presented a statement. At stake now is the burden of proof, i.e. who has to show that the genetically engineered plants are safe or unsafe? The final ruling might effectively become a precedent. Thomas Bøhn's recent EFSA paper was brought in as evidence. The opinion of the Attorney General is expected on 10 October. Details about the hearing can be found on the [Testbiotech website](#).

### *Website*

The newly designed website now shows reports of ENSSER events, press releases, ENSSER publications and news from the members. A donation button has also been added.

## 7. Internal matters

At the end of January, ENSSER received a final decision by the German Pension Insurance clarifying the „debts“ it had claimed from us for the period of 2010 – 2013. The decision is that the work of Gabriele Weiss and Hartmut Meyer is now classified as free-lance, which means that no additional payments for the pension insurance for employees are necessary. Only Lucas Wirl's work in the last months of 2013 was classified as the typical work of an employee, not of a free-lancer. This means that the original additional payments of € 34,700 are reduced to € 402, which have now been paid by ENSSER. This decision, which comes after years of indecision of the pension fund following their initial claim, is due to long and

consistent work of our lawyers and Lucas Wirl to resolve the issue.

The hard work of our bookkeeper Amela Skiljan to claim the large backlog of membership fees from our members has resulted in a fair decrease of this backlog. It has also resulted in seven members cancelling their membership.