

This report has been written for the Annual General Meeting of ENSSER members on 22 November 2017 in Athens. It covers the period from the previous AGM (12 November 2017) until the present AGM.

## **1. Conferences organised**

*Scientific conference "Taking stock - 20 Years of GM crops - 40 years of 'genetic engineering'", 1-2 December 2016, Mexico City; and side events at COP MOP 8 of the Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety, 5-9 December 2016, Cancún*

ENSSER presented current scientific work of its members and other scientists before and at the international Meeting of the Parties (COP MOP) of the Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety. The 8th COP MOP of the Cartagena Protocol was convened in Cancún, Mexico. ENSSER for the fourth time since 2010 joined with national and international groups to organise a public conference in the host country of the COP MOP and to interact with the delegates and policy makers during the UN meeting. Our organising partners were the Third World Network (TWN) and our Mexican sister organisations the Unión de Científicos Comprometidos con la Sociedad (UCCS) and the Unión de Científicos Comprometidos con la Sociedad y la Naturaleza de América Latina (UCCSNAL).

Much work went into this biennial GM conference preceding the COP MOP of the Cartagena Protocol. The conference looked back on 40 years of genetic engineering, compared claims to achievements and evaluated the contribution and risks of the technology to agriculture and health to date. Historic overviews and current highlights from all continents were presented. While the COP MOP itself was convened in Cancún, our scientific conference took part in Mexico City at the Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM) to reach out to students and scientists. Except for three speakers cancelling (who were replaced by others), the conference proceeded nicely, with many impressive presentations by renowned speakers.

A report of the whole conference and the slides of most individual presentations can be found at: [Scientific Conference "TAKING STOCK - 20 YEARS OF GM CROPS - 40 YEARS OF 'GENETIC ENGINEERING' " 1 – 2 Dec 2016, Mexico City](#)

A good number of the presentations were repeated in three side events we organised at the COP MOP itself in Cancún. Our organising partners for the three side events at the COP MOP in Cancún were TWN, UCCS, the African Centre for Biodiversity (ACB) and Washington Biotechnology Action Council (WashBAC). Attendance was very good with 50, 55 and 35 participants, respectively. A number of GM lobbyists (including some specially 'trained' students) attempted to disturb our side events with impertinent and unscientific questions, but the side event chairpersons and speakers managed to properly counter and control these attacks. Descriptions of the side events, along with the report of the preceding conference, can be found on the CBD website under the following links:

[Current Status of Uncontrolled Transgene Spread](#) , 5 December 2016

[No Lessons from Previous Warnings?](#) , 7 December 2016

[Biodiversity Under Threat: the Gates Foundation, Philanthrocapitalism, and the Capture of African Agricultural Biodiversity](#) , 9 December 2016

*Preparatory meeting with students about sustainable energy production and use, 29 May 2017, Berlin*

A meeting with students about sustainable energy production and use was organised by ENSSER on 29 May 2017 at the Technical University Berlin. Lucas Wirl and Michael Dittmar held this meeting, aided by the General Student Representation (AStA) of the University. Michael Dittmar held a presentation. The meeting was meant as a preparation for the Energy Workshop which ENSSER will hold in Berlin on 13 December 2017.

## **2. Projects**

- On 16 November 2016 the project "[Risk Assessment of GE Organisms in the EU and Switzerland](#)" (RAGES) was started. This is a co-operative project carried out by Testbiotech (Christoph Then), ENSSER (Angelika Hilbeck), Critical Scientists Switzerland (Luigi d'Andrea) and GeneWatch (Helen Wallace). Testbiotech leads the project; it is funded by Stiftung Mercator Schweiz. It involves more than a dozen experts from five European countries (including our member Nicolas Defarge). The results will be published at a conference in 2018. The consortium will not be carrying out experimental risk research itself, but will base its analysis on a wide range of scientific publications and databases.
- Prof. Damián Verzeñassi of the University of Rosario (Argentina) has collected a huge medical data set from Argentinian people exposed to the herbicide Roundup. Nicolas Defarge, along with other international experts, is assisting Verzeñassi in analysing these data. (See also under "Publications" below.)
- The project "Gene Drives" has started on 2 October 2017. This is an initiative of Critical Scientists Switzerland (Eva Gelinsky and Tamara Lebrecht), co-operating with ENSSER (Diederick Sprangers and Lucas Wirl) and the Federation of German Scientists (Ricarda Steinbrecher). It is funded by the Stiftung Mercator Schweiz; additional funding will be sought from another sponsor. 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 are advocated for various reasons, including efforts to eradicate whole populations of pests or carriers of human or animal diseases (e.g. insects such as mosquitoes that carry human malaria pathogens, or flies that eat the cherry fruit in orchards). Gene drives carry a special risk of causing ecological imbalance and disruption. The goal of the project is to stimulate the public debate about gene drives in Switzerland and Europe by providing a solid, independent scientific basis of information. This basis will be provided through a report compiled by experts and reviewing the available scientific literature. On the basis of the report, a public symposium will be held in Berne for an audience including policy makers, regulators, scientists and the general public.
- The publishing company of Springer 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. Representations and public interventions**

- 16 November 2016: ENSSER was identified as a potential Bio-Bridge Initiative partner under the Convention on Biological Diversity, by answering a CBD survey.

- 23 November 2016, Brussels: Christoph Then participated in a public discussion of EFSA with stakeholder groups about the definition and regulation of EFSA's independence.
- 5 December 2017: ENSSER joined a call for a Moratorium on New Genetic Extinction Technology (= gene drives) by over 160 civil society organisations from six continents. The call was directed to the CBD COP13 (13th Conference of the Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity) in Cancún.
- 8 December 2016: Feedback was provided to the European Commission in its consultation on the [Draft Commission Directive updating the environmental risk assessment of GMOs](#). ENSSER's feedback was written by Hartmut Meyer. Friends of the Earth Europe also submitted feedback, with input from ENSSER members Brian Wynne, Christoph Then, Martha Mertens and Erik Millstone.
- 14 February 2017, Berlin, Leopoldina (German Nat. Academy of Sciences): Ricarda Steinbrecher participated, representing ENSSER, in the symposium "[Brauchen wir eine neue Gentechnik-Definition? Naturwissenschaftliche, ethische und rechtliche Perspektiven der Regulierung genom-editierter Pflanzen](#)" ("Do we need a new definition of genetic engineering? Scientific, ethical and legal perspectives of the regulation of genome edited plants"). Journalists attending the event received a list of statements about the new GM techniques from 20 scientists, including Angelika Hilbeck and Ricarda Steinbrecher. The list was prepared by Science Media Center Germany in collaboration with Leopoldina.
- 15 February 2017: Erik Millstone and Judy Carman were nominated by ENSSER and accepted as members of the "ECHA/EFSA Member States Advisory body supporting the preparation of the Guidance for Endocrine Disruption hazard identification". However, on 23 March, EFSA changed the role of Millstone and Carman from "members" to "hearing experts" without any explanation, using a no-reply email address to inform them. Goran Kumric, EFSA's Stakeholder Engagement Officer, could not provide an explanation to our co-ordinator Diederick Sprangers. As Judy Carman found out on the EFSA website, a Decision of the Executive Director concerning the selection of members of the scientific committee, the scientific panels and the selection of experts to assist EFSA with its scientific work (REF.EFSA/SCISTRAT/DEC/01/2014) says about this: "Hearing experts do not carry out tasks that are under the responsibility of the members of the respective scientific body, i.e. to particulate [participate? – DS] in deliberations to vote and to chair or be a rapporteur. They may present topics and answer questions, but they shall not draft scientific outputs and they shall not be involved in the adoption of the scientific output." Erik Millstone still provided comments to EFSA/ECHA on the draft guidance document on 2 May.
- 24 February 2017: ENSSER was registered as an official stakeholder of EFSA in the category "Academia". EFSA has created a new "[Stakeholder Engagement Approach](#)" for communicating with its stakeholders, dividing them into seven categories, one of which is "Academia". The new approach replaces the old "Stakeholder Consultative Platform".
- 7-10 March 2017, Bonn: Christine von Weizsaecker represented ENSSER at IPBES5 (Fifth Session of the Plenary of the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services).
- 14 March 2017: Ricarda Steinbrecher gave a presentation entitled "What are the new techniques of genetic engineering, in particular genome-editing techniques? Why should these techniques and their products be regulated as other GMOs? How do gene-editing techniques relate to synthetic biology and gene drives?" in the Webinar "New GM techniques and associated environmental and health risks" organised by Corporate Europe Observatory and Friends of the Earth Europe.
- 17 March 2017: ENSSER co-signed a letter from Corporate Europe Observatory to EFSA's Management Board about EFSA's new draft independence policy. The letter was also co-signed by European Coordination Via Campesina, GeneWatch UK, Pesticide Action Network Europe, Sciences Citoyennes and Testbiotech. The letter criticised the draft policy as insufficient, and said it should be improved before it is adopted. Our board member Brian Wynne added the point that EFSA not only needs to become independent from industry, but also from the EC (DG SANTE), their policy client, i.e. the institution from which they get the questions to be answered concerning food safety policy. EFSA should reformulate these questions to proper scientific questions.

- 30 March 2017, Brussels: A meeting of Corporate Europe Observatory (Martin Pigeon) with DG SANTE and DG Research of the European Commission took place, for which many ENSSER members had given input through our member list. The subject was the suggestion that the risk assessment of regulated products should be reformed. The intention was that ENSSER would be present at the meeting too, but this fell through, mainly due to misunderstanding between CEO and the EC about the date, which was changed several times.
- 28 April 2017, Athens: A public lecture on "Pesticides and GMOs in our food: Environment and Health" was held by Angelika Hilbeck before an audience including members of the Greek Parliament. The lecture was organised by the Mariolopoulo Kanaginis Foundation and the Medical School of the University of Athens. The initiator of the event was Polyxeni Nicolopoulou - Stamatii. At this meeting the initiative arose for ENSSER to organise the workshop "Agriculture and health: the need for greening Europe - an opportunity for Greece" on 24 November in Athens.
- 28 April 2017: ENSSER nominated Brian Wynne for the academic seat in the new EFSA Stakeholder Bureau. This Bureau, another product of EFSA's new "Stakeholder Engagement Approach" mentioned above, advises EFSA on stakeholder engagement and provides its views on whether EFSA is engaging with stakeholders in a balanced way. The Bureau should provide input to EFSA at a high level with regard to societal concerns on issues in EFSA's remit. It has seven seats, one for each of the seven categories of EFSA stakeholders. In the category "[Academia](#)" there are five stakeholders: ENSSER, EuroScience, FENS, SETAC and UFAW. When it appeared that a nominee from SETAC would be elected on the academic seat, ENSSER chair Hartmut Meyer pointed out in a letter to EFSA Director Bernhard Url that SETAC represents not only academia, but also industry and regulators, so that a SETAC nominee on this seat would contradict EFSA's stated goal of "balanced representation of views and interests". Nonetheless, Jose Julio Ortega-Calvo, nominated by SETAC, was elected on the academic seat. (NB Not EFSA, but the academic stakeholders elected him from three candidates, the third being from FENS.) Meanwhile, the [Bureau held its first meeting](#) on 19 September 2017.
- 30-31 May 2017, Parma: Diederick Sprangers took part in the [first EFSA Stakeholder Forum](#), an annual meeting of registered stakeholder organisations of EFSA. When the audience were asked for points on which EFSA may improve its work, Sprangers suggested two points: risk research must be done by independent institutions (but it must still be paid by industry); and testing methods must be redesigned and based on independent scientific principles. Requested to illustrate the latter, he provided, after consulting our members by email, a list of 21 examples of cases where EFSA might improve the scientific quality of the methods (protocols) of risk assessment and/or risk research used or allowed by EFSA. He also offered that ENSSER could organise a workshop for the purpose of discussing this material. This point should be taken up yet.
- 7 June 2017, Brussels: Ricarda Steinbrecher held a presentation on the New GM techniques in the European Parliament.
- 7-8 June 2017, Brussels: 19 NGOs participated in a meeting organised by Corporate Europe Observatory to discuss the New GM techniques. Ricarda Steinbrecher held a presentation and Diederick Sprangers participated.
- 25-26 September 2017, Tübingen: Angelika Hilbeck, representing ENSSER, held an invited lecture on the topic "[Inconvenient or post-truth - an account from a science minefield](#)" at the Symposium "['Post-truth' and a crisis of trust?](#)".
- 28 September 2017, Brussels: Ricarda Steinbrecher, representing ENSSER, spoke in one of the panels at the EC conference "Modern Biotechnologies in Agriculture – Paving the way for responsible innovation" about the new GM techniques. ENSSER had proposed more speakers from ENSSER, notably Erik Millstone, Fern Wickson and Christoph Then, but none were invited.
- 17 October 2017, Vienna: Luigi d'Andrea took part for CSS and ENSSER in the "Special event on the risk assessment of new plant breeding techniques", organised by the Umweltbundesamt (Environment Agency Austria).
- 19-20 October 2017, Rotterdam: Diederick Sprangers took part in the Symposium 'Gene editing in animals; applications and implications' organised by COGEM (Netherlands)

Commission on Genetic Modification).

- 7 November 2017: Ulrich Loening applied for membership of a [project team of the FAO's Committee on World Food Security \(CFS\)](#), which will write a report on Agroecological approaches and other innovations for sustainable agriculture and food systems that enhance food security and nutrition, to be presented at CFS46 Plenary session in October 2019. This is expected to be an influential report: it could play a key role to counteract the attempts by corporations to capture agroecology to greenwash agribusiness.
- 10 November 2017: Professor Dave Goulson, well-known bee expert from the University of Sussex (not an ENSSER member), having been nominated by ENSSER, was accepted by EFSA as academic expert to the EFSA Discussion Group on EU Bee Partnership for Data Sharing.

#### 4. Publications

- 21 November 2016: ENSSER wrote an [open letter of protest](#) to the Rector of the University of Rosario (Argentina) about the treatment of Prof. Damián Verzeñassi by the university. Prof. Verzeñassi had been a witness at the Monsanto Tribunal in The Hague (October 2016). Upon his return to the University of Rosario after this, he found himself locked out of his lab and data. Our board member Nicolas Defarge (who had also been a witness at the Tribunal) helped Verzeñassi to regain access to his lab and data. Since the affair hardly received any attention in the international media, ENSSER wrote the letter. About Verzeñassi's work and ENSSER's further involvement with this: see under "Projects" above.
- 4 April 2017: Ricarda Steinbrecher co-authored a publication [in The Ecologist](#) entitled "'New Breeding Techniques' and synthetic biology - genetic engineering by another name".
- 8 May 2017: Rosa Binimelis, Ignacio Chapela, Bernadette Oehen, Angelika Hilbeck and others published the scientific paper "[Teosinte in Europe – Searching for the Origin of a Novel Weed](#)", *Scientific Reports* **7**, Article number: 1560 (2017), doi:10.1038/s41598-017-01478-w.
- 25 August 2017: Hartmut Meyer and Angelika Hilbeck, representing ENSSER, co-signed an open letter by J. Daniel Dahm, Alexandra Wandel and Felix zu Löwenstein to encourage the four journalists questioning the two competing candidates for Chancellor of Germany in the only televised debate before the German elections to raise the issue of transformation to a regenerative agriculture by building up humus and biodiversity.
- 27 September 2017: ENSSER published the statement "Products of new genetic modification techniques should be strictly regulated as GMOs", along with a press release. Upon publication the statement had been signed by 60 scientists and physicians; more signatures are still being received. The statement was written by Michael Antoniou, Ignacio Chapela, Nicolas Defarge, Angelika Hilbeck, Claire Robinson, Diederick Sprangers and Ricarda Steinbrecher, with input from others. ENSSER chair Hartmut Meyer sent it with a letter to EU Commissioners Juncker, Vella (Environment), Andriukaitis (Health and Food Safety), Hogan (Agriculture) and Malmström (Trade) as well as to the Executive Director of EFSA and the chairs of the relevant commissions of the European Parliament. This statement was much needed and had indeed been requested from us, but took a long time to write due to the wide and complex subject matter. A decision from the European Commission about regulation of the NGMTs, as we call them in the statement, is still being awaited and has been so for at least ten years. Translations of the statement are being made into Chinese, German, French, Spanish and Dutch.

#### 5. Members' email list

The use of the members' email list is increasing, both with regard to the number of subjects and the number of members involved. Examples can be found above: many of the topics mentioned in this report have been discussed on the member list, some extensively. Two topics from the list not mentioned above were the level of democracy and transparency of ENSSER in organising its meetings and conferences, and ENSSER's approach to EFSA. The first

was addressed in October 2017 by Dominique Cellier, president of Sciences Citoyennes (one of the organisational members of ENSSER), who wanted more contact between the staff/board and members about the meetings to be organised. He was quite right in saying that the announcement of the three upcoming meetings in Athens (22 – 24 November 2017) came very late. There is certainly room for improvement here, e.g. with a newsletter; on the other hand, the most essential thing for organising meetings on scientific topics are initiatives from our members (both for topics and for local logistics). Also, since Sciences Citoyennes is the only one of our organisational members not currently represented on the board of ENSSER, Cellier was invited to propose a board member.

A little later, Christian Vélot expanded this discussion by criticising the way in which ENSSER approaches EFSA. He objects to the fact that we supply EFSA with scientific information and co-operate with the institute, and wanted an open discussion about this strategy. He suggests that EFSA has lost its legitimacy and should be approached offensively instead of being co-operated with; our current approach would "endorse" EFSA as it is. This message was not new; it had already been discussed in the early years of ENSSER, and lack of support for his opinion was in fact the reason why Christian Vélot stepped down from the ENSSER board in 2013, though he remained a member. This time, the matter was discussed on the email list and again there was more support for ENSSER's current strategy towards EFSA than for the offensive approach.

Nonetheless, both points will be discussed at the AGM.

## **6. Website**

ENSSER's website had a number of technical drawbacks which made it inadequate for its purpose. Therefore, a new provider has been taken and a new design of the website has been launched, both in September 2017. The new website is still being built up further; new facilities will be added.

## **7. Other activities**

### *Intacta lawsuit*

In our lawsuit, lead by Testbiotech and supported by some more organisations, against the European Commission concerning the incorrect assessment and authorisation for import of Monsanto's Intacta soybeans, our claims were unfortunately [rejected](#) (15 December 2016). Upon the advice of our lawyers, however, we appealed against the verdict in February.