

# Biotechnology, Genetically Modified Crops and the Destruction of the Local Economy

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[Environment](#)

Will the biotech companies ever give up on trying to sell Europe their genetically modified crops? Their latest PR man is the UK's Minister for the Department of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra), Owen Paterson. His website (very bland and uninformative apart from his list of [engagements](#)) says he is "a passionate supporter of localism, free enterprise and less interference in people's lives". But he also loudly supports Monsanto et al, and wants all of Europe to grow and eat GM foods. I would say that thoroughly destroys any localism, interferes in the most basic way with our lives, and any enterprise is freely handed to big corporations that already have far too much power over people.

Paterson has had environmentalists tearing their hair out since he became Minister. As I wrote in [Unnatural England](#), he's promoted the destruction of buzzards and supports the killing of badgers. He's also greatly in favour of fracking for shale gas regardless of the damage it would do. His statements on environmental matters display strongly-held views that are disastrous for the environment but kind to big business. To that end he will only look at the facts as presented by companies such as Monsanto.

He failed to persuade Europe that neonicotinoid pesticides (as produced by Monsanto et al) are [good](#) for bees; he said that the scientific evidence linking the decline in bee numbers to neonicotinoids was faulty; and that Europe should see the results of Defra's own field trials. The UK Parliament's environmental audit committee said the government was relying on 'fundamentally flawed' [studies](#) to push its case for preventing the Europe-wide precautionary ban of these pesticides. It turned out these studies were not peer-reviewed or published in any reputable scientific journal, merely published on Defra's own website - for which the EU Commission criticized the British government.

Paterson's online information is remarkably devoid of detail: he went to school and university; his family had a background of farming and leather; he went into the leather business; he is married, with children; he became an MP, and so on. No business interests or links of any kind are listed yet he is acting as cheerleader for the GM companies. And he made a small Freudian slip during his speech. He used the word 'we', as in "We have not come up with any evidence of human health being threatened by these products." Just what Monsanto and Syngenta say.

On more than one occasion he has tried to persuade the public that we should all accept a diet of GM food and we stubbornly refuse to be converted. But his [speech](#) last week on the wonders of GM crops topped them all. He said he was 'certain' that GM crops are safer than

conventional varieties because “These products go through the most rigorous system. It is extraordinarily closely regulated...” Do I hear hollow laughter from all those independent researchers into GM foods?

He went on: “...you have the biggest field trial in human history when you think of the colossal volume of GM material that has been eaten in all those countries growing GM food.” Sorry, Mr Paterson, but the biggest field trial in human history took place over millennia when the world was growing and eating organic food. And perhaps he hadn’t read, or was ignoring, the very recent Friends of the Earth Europe-wide [study](#) that found weedkiller residues in over 40% of human urine samples (glyphosate, the biggest producer of which is Monsanto).

Mistake after mistake was recited as fact, and faithfully reported by most of the right-wing media – except for the Daily Mail. Normally great supporters of all things Conservative, the Mail pulled his speech to [pieces](#).

One of his most outrageous claims was this: “Over the last 15 years... every attempt to deploy Golden Rice (modified to boost Vitamin A) has been thwarted and in that time seven million children have gone blind or died.” The Mail struck that down with this riposte: “Earlier this year, the International Rice Research Institute, which is working on the Golden Rice project, denied reports that it was available for commercial planting, saying it has yet to pass safety tests or prove it could reduce vitamin A deficiency.”

The Channel4’s [FactCheck Blog](#) had this to say: “(Paterson) can’t claim that by not providing the rice the blindness and deaths have occurred, as we don’t know what would have happened had the rice been provided.” Health experts say the problem is a lack of Vitamin A, not Golden Rice – a problem solved by educating mothers how to feed their children on easily available foods containing Vitamin A.

Paterson claimed GM food was safer; “There is no substantiated case of any adverse impact on human health.” The Mail pointed out that: “In May 2011, independent doctors in Canada reported that toxins implanted into GM crops to kill pests were reaching the bloodstreams of women and unborn babies.”

Paterson claimed that GM was good for the environment. He said: “There is a very strong environmental case for GM, We can farm more efficiently, using new technology and using less land. It gives a wonderful [opportunity](#) to free up land for wilderness and forestry.” And presumably for pheasant shoots as well, that being another of Paterson’s passions.

He said there is no evidence of GM crops harming the environment but ignored, among other problems, [‘superweeds’](#) that are resistant to the herbicides designed to kill them. Farmers across North America could have told him. Farmers could tell him too of the dangers of feeding GM to their [animals](#), but as the biotech companies dismiss such evidence, so too will their mouthpiece. The Mail said the evidence showed real damage to the environment. Following GM crop trials in the UK, where fields had been heavily sprayed with a powerful weedkiller, the result was that it not only wiped out weeds, but also wild plants and insects.

He insisted that GM crops produce higher yields than conventional crops. He could ask Indian cotton farmers, the ones that haven’t committed suicide that is, after seeing their livelihoods [ruined](#). And the Mail pointed out that recently published research showed that

“increases in crop yields have been much greater in countries which have not adopted GM.”

When asked by the Daily Mail he said (with some hesitation) that he would be happy to feed a GM tomato to his family, not that one tomato shared between his wife and three children would go that far. But when the Mail contacted 17 government ministers, none of them would own to being comfortable with GM food. They also found that all the [restaurants](#) in the Houses of Parliament have had a ‘no GM food’ policy for quite some years. Customer choice rules, even in Westminster, despite government ministers wanting the public to eat the foods they refuse to.

This constant dishonest pressure on the public from people like Paterson to accept something they do not want must stop. It is dishonest because their ‘facts’ are at the least unproven, and at worst, untrue. Nor do they really care about feeding the world. If they did they’d stop the waste of so much food and ensure people had equal access to what the earth can provide. This is all about giving the biotech companies control over the world’s food.

Why do I personally care so much about stopping GM food? I live in a rural area of great natural beauty. There is a strong organic presence here, in local growers, producers and shops. The village is full of gardeners. We grow our own vegetables and fruit. And we love our environment. My own garden is full of weeds. I call them wild flowers. They plant themselves, helped by the birds. They grow happily among the ‘cultivated’ plants and they provide a rich environment for bees and all the other pollinating insects. I don’t want this rich celebration of natural life turned into the kind of wasteland that comes from growing GM crops and the accompanying heavy use of pesticides and herbicides.

This garden, this land, is my home. I value every tiny flower and fly. This is their home too, and they are important. If I’m honest, I have to admit they have a more important place in the cycle of natural life than I or any human does. If anything has to disappear from this beloved countryside it should be Owen Paterson.

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