

Pro-GMO Campaign exploits Nobel Laureates to attack Greenpeace and Fool the People

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A new pro-GMO propaganda campaign has been launched in which, in the words of a Washington Post [article](#), “more than 100 Nobel laureates have signed a [letter](#) urging Greenpeace to end its opposition to genetically modified organisms (GMOs). The letter asks Greenpeace to cease its efforts to block introduction of a genetically engineered strain of rice that supporters say could reduce Vitamin-A deficiencies causing blindness and death in children in the developing world.”

In highly emotive language, the [letter](#), published by a shadowy website called supportprecisionagriculture.org, claims, “Greenpeace has spearheaded opposition to Golden Rice, which has the potential to reduce or eliminate much of the death and disease caused by a vitamin A deficiency (VAD), which has the greatest impact on the poorest people in Africa and Southeast Asia.”

The letter calls upon Greenpeace: “to cease and desist in its campaign against Golden Rice specifically, and crops and foods improved through biotechnology in general”, and upon governments “to reject Greenpeace’s campaign against Golden Rice specifically, and crops and foods improved through biotechnology in general; and to do everything in their power to oppose Greenpeace’s actions and accelerate the access of farmers to all the tools of modern biology, especially seeds improved through biotechnology. Opposition based on emotion and dogma contradicted by data must be stopped.”

The letter ends with an impassioned rhetorical question:

“How many poor people in the world must die before we consider this a ‘crime against humanity’?”

The problem with this picture is that the “emotion and dogma” in this case do not belong to Greenpeace but to those who claim or imply that GM golden rice is ready to deploy and that only anti-GMO activists are holding it back.

That’s because in reality, as Prof Glenn Davis Stone [pointed out](#) in a peer-reviewed [study](#) co-authored with development expert Dominic Glover, GM golden rice still isn’t ready and there’s no evidence that activists are to blame for the delay.

In 2014 the body responsible for the rollout of golden rice, the International Rice Research Institute (IRRI), [announced](#) that the rice had given disappointing yields in field trials and needed further R&D to produce a crop that farmers would be willing to grow. Stone [commented](#), “The rice simply has not been successful in test plots of the rice

breeding institutes in the Philippines, where the leading research is being done.” Stone’s study [showed](#) that the rice is still years away from being ready.

And far from the rice being held up by over-stringent regulations fostered by over-zealous anti-GMO activists, as some pro-GMO campaigners have claimed, Stone [pointed out](#) that GM golden rice “has not even been submitted for approval to the regulatory agency, the Philippine Bureau of Plant Industry (BPI).”

Indeed, how could it have been submitted to regulators, given that IRRI says it’s not ready for release and that it hasn’t been tested for toxicity, let alone efficacy in combating vitamin A deficiency in the target malnourished populations?

As Greenpeace stated in its [response](#) to the campaign:

“Accusations that anyone is blocking genetically engineered ‘golden’ rice are false. ‘Golden’ rice has failed as a solution and isn’t currently available for sale, even after more than 20 years of research. As admitted by the International Rice Research Institute, it has not been proven to actually address Vitamin A Deficiency. So to be clear, we are talking about something that doesn’t even exist.”

Authority over expertise

The laureates’ letter relies for its impact entirely on the supposed authority of the signatories. Unfortunately, however, none appear to have relevant expertise, as some commentators were quick to point out. Philip Stark, associate dean, division of mathematical and physical sciences and professor of statistics at the University of California, Berkeley, [revealed](#) on Twitter his own analysis of the expertise of the signatories: “1 peace prize, 8 economists, 24 physicists, 33 chemists, 41 doctors”. He added that science is “about evidence not authority. What do they know of agriculture? Done relevant research? Science is supposed to be ‘show me’, not ‘trust me’... Nobel prize or not.”

Devon G. Peña, PhD, an anthropologist at the University of Washington Seattle and an expert in indigenous agriculture, posted a comment to the new campaign’s website in which he called the laureates’ letter “shameful”. He noted that the signatories were “mostly white men of privilege with little background in risk science, few with a background in toxicology studies, and certainly none with knowledge of the indigenous agroecological alternatives. All of you should be stripped of your Nobels.”

The lack of expertise among the letter signatories contrasts markedly with that of the man whose work the new propaganda campaign seems to be attempting to discredit. Glenn Davis Stone – who has never opposed GM golden rice – is an expert on crop use and technology change among poor farmers, including rice farmers in the Philippines, the country targeted for the golden rice rollout – if it ever happens. He has been following the evidence on the progress of golden rice for years and has published extensively on the topic.

In other words, unlike the laureates, he knows what he’s talking about.

Who is behind the letter?

The new propaganda campaign is [said](#) to have been organized by Sir Richard J. Roberts. Roberts is a Nobel Laureate in physiology or medicine for the discovery of genetic sequences known as introns, and chief scientific officer for New England Biolabs. According to their [website](#), New England Biolabs are “a collective of scientists committed to developing innovative products for the life sciences industry... a recognized world leader in the discovery, development and commercialization of recombinant and native enzymes for genomic research.”

Given these facts, it is surprising that Roberts [claims](#) that he has “no financial interest in GMO research”.

According to the writer and researcher Colin Todhunter, Roberts has been [propagandizing](#) for GM food and crops in India. Todhunter says Roberts’ speech included emotional blackmail in the form of a claim that millions of people in the third world would die of starvation unless GM crops were introduced, as well as highly questionable assertions about the safety of the technology.

Conflicts of interest and bias aside, if you think it’s unlikely that Roberts alone would be able to mobilize over a hundred Nobel laureates to launch a campaign that gives patently false information about a GM crop that may never see the light of day in real farmers’ fields, you are not alone.

So who’s really behind the laureates’ letter?

Some odd goings-on at the press conference announcing the letter may give a clue. Tim Schwab of the NGO, Food & Water Watch and a Greenpeace representative tried to attend the press event, held at the National Press Club. However, Schwab reported, “We were barred at the door from entry – by none other than Jay Byrne, whose long relationship with Monsanto needs no elaboration.”

Byrne is a [former](#) Monsanto PR man who now heads the PR firm to the biotech industry, v-Fluence.

Schwab commented that it was “a bizarre choice for this campaign to have Byrne play bouncer.” He added, “Byrne said only credentialed press were allowed to attend. Seconds later I saw a representative from CSPI (an NGO) entering the room. Byrne said some NGOs were invited to attend. Really? Why not Greenpeace – the subject of this campaign?”

Schwab [tweeted](#), “Nobel laureate #gmo #goldenrice press event would be a lot more credible if industry guy wasn’t blacklisting NGOs.”

Why now?

The timing of this press event may be significant. Could it be timed to coincide with the run-up to the GMO labelling vote in Senate, with the added ‘bonus’ of burying Stone’s inconvenient golden rice critique?

Whatever the answer to that question, the ‘supportprecisionagriculture.org’ campaign is shamelessly exploiting a group of Nobel laureates in a propaganda exercise that is actively misleading the public, the media, and governments.

Update 30 June, 20:00 hrs: GMWatch has been alerted to the fact that the website for the

laureates' letter is supportprecisionagriculture.org, but the .com version, supportprecisionagriculture.com, reroutes to the Genetic Literacy Project, which US Right to Know [calls](#) an “agrchemical industry front group... with unknown funding that regularly attacks activists, journalists and scientists who raise concerns about the health and environmental risks of genetically engineered foods and pesticides.” Its executive director is [Jon Entine](#).

Update 1 July 2016: A GMWatch reader has pointed out to us that the second [organizer](#) of the laureates' letter alongside Richard J. Roberts is Phillip A. Sharp, who works at the David H. Koch Institute at MIT.

An [article](#) for the website Science Alert about the “107 laureates” publicity stunt describes Sharp only as “the winner of the 1993 Nobel Prize in Physiology”.

What the article fails to mention is that Sharp is a biotech entrepreneur with interests in GMO research. In 1978 he [co-founded](#) the biotechnology and pharmaceutical company Biogen and in 2002 he co-founded Alnylam Pharmaceuticals, which [uses](#) RNAi gene silencing genetic engineering technologies to manufacture therapeutics.

To be clear, GMWatch does not oppose the use of genetic technologies in contained use situations, such as medicine, as long as there is informed consent by the patient to the therapy and no risk to non-target populations and the environment. However, Sharp's interests in biotech companies should be disclosed in any GMO advocacy exercises he engages in, just as they would be if he were to publish a paper on GMO technologies in any reputable scientific journal.

Does Sharp's interests in medical biotech constitute a conflict of interest when it comes to his advocacy for GM in food and agriculture?

It is true that medical uses of GM are separate from food and ag uses and are regulated by different laws. It is a perfectly cogent position to oppose genetic engineering in food and ag while supporting medical use or remaining neutral to it.

However, from a crude industry perspective, the less public concerns there are around GM technologies, the better. That's presumably why industry lobby groups like BIO [represent](#) food and ag alongside other sectors of the biotech industry, including medicine. And why we should treat lobbying for GM crops by medical biotech entrepreneurs with the same skepticism as if they were involved in the GM crops industry.

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