



Organic Food Quality & Health

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# Organic Food Quality News

MAY 2004

This monthly newsletter, edited by nutritionist and independent organic researcher Shane Heaton, is provided by the FQH association to keep researchers, the industry and other interested parties abreast of the latest news in organic food quality, research, health, diet and other relevant issues. Comments and contributions are welcome, or if you find an item of news that you think should be included, please email [shane@dontjustsurvive.com](mailto:shane@dontjustsurvive.com)

## Quote of the month:

**"We are nowhere near the level of understanding to be able to protect human health and the natural environment [from GM crops]. Unfortunately, we are already feeding this technology to millions of people and released it into the environment where it can never be recalled. It is a strategy that is really, really risky."** Jeffrey Smith, founder and director of the Institute for Responsible Technology in the US and author of *Seeds of Deception - Exposing Corporate and Government Lies about the Safety of Genetically Engineered Food*.

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# 1. PESTICIDES

## **Canada: Physicians Warn Public To Avoid Pesticides**

A review of pesticide research from The Ontario College of Family Physicians has claimed there is a link between pesticide exposure and serious illnesses. The review, "Systematic Review of Pesticides Human Health Effects" highlights "consistent links" to serious illnesses such as cancer, reproductive problems and neurological diseases, with children being particularly vulnerable. "Occupational exposure to agricultural chemicals may be associated with adverse reproductive effects," said the OCFP. These include birth defects, foetal death and intrauterine growth retardation. "Many of the health problems linked with pesticide use are serious and difficult to treat - so we are advocating reducing exposure to pesticides and prevention of harm as the best approach," said Margaret Sanborn of McMaster University, one of the review's authors.

Principle findings of the review include:

- Occupational exposure to agricultural chemicals may be associated with adverse reproductive effects including: birth defects, foetal death and intrauterine growth retardation.
- Associations between various cancers and pesticide exposure, including brain cancer, prostate cancer, kidney cancer and pancreatic cancer, among others. Previous studies have pointed to certain pesticides, such as 2,4-D and related products, as possible precipitants of non-Hodgkin's lymphoma (NHL), and the findings of the College's review are consistent with this.
- A clear association between pesticide exposure and leukaemia, including an increased risk of acute leukemia in children exposed to pesticides in utero or during childhood, especially for exposure to insecticides and herbicides used on lawns, fruit trees and gardens, and for indoor control of insects.
- A remarkable consistency of findings of nervous system effects from pesticide exposures.
- An elevated risk of kidney cancer in children was associated with paternal pesticide exposure through agriculture, and four studies found associations with brain cancer.

For more information download the full report (free) at [www.ocfp.ca](http://www.ocfp.ca)

## **US: Farm workers at increased risk of prostate cancer**

Recent research conducted by the US National Cancer Institute and published in the American Journal of Epidemiology has highlighted an increased risk of prostate cancer in farmers and farm-workers. Methyl bromide increased the risk of prostate cancer in all men, while six other compounds – chlorpyrifos, coumaphos, fonopos, phorate, permethrin and butylate – raised the risk only in

men with a family history of prostate cancer. (Methyl-bromide also damages the ozone layer, though Australia and the US are currently delaying international efforts to phase it out.)

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## 2. ADDITIVES

### **UK: Additives linked to hyperactivity**

Artificial colourings and preservatives in food and drink boost levels of hyperactivity in pre-school children and urgent consideration should be given to removing them, doctors say.

The additives have a "significant" impact on the behaviour of ordinary children and their elimination would be in the long-term interests of public health, researchers from the University of Southampton say. The proportion of children with high levels of hyperactivity was halved when the additives were removed, the researchers found. The Food Standards Agency, which assessed the findings, is to fund a larger follow-up study, beginning in September and continuing for three years. Professor John Warner of the department of child health at Southampton University, who led the study published in Archives of Child Health, said: "These findings suggest that significant changes in children's hyperactive behaviour could be produced by the removal of artificial colourings and sodium benzoate from their diet." Professor Warner said the doses of additives used in the study were "on the low side of normal," and the effects were felt across all the children, regardless of their sensitivity to allergy causing substances. (The Independent; Daily Mail)

### **US: Campaign to ban trans fats launched**

A campaign has been launched to purge trans-fatty acids, or "trans-fats", from the United States' cakes, snacks and fast foods. Evidence for the harmful effects of trans-fats has mounted. In 2002, a US expert committee charged with making nutritional recommendations concluded that there was no level of trans-fats in the diet that could be deemed safe. A US nutritional group called the Center for Science in the Public Interest, based in Washington DC, now hopes that its TransFreeAmerica campaign will raise awareness of the health concerns. It is urging food manufacturers to eliminate trans-fats and advising consumers to boycott foods containing them. It is also calling on the US Food and Drug Administration to outlaw partially hydrogenated vegetable oils. (Nature magazine – 19/05/04 SA 28/5)

### **UK: Safety of additives in soft-drinks questioned**

Popular soft drinks are packed with additives linked to potential health problems,

according to a Daily Mail survey. Ten of the biggest-selling soft drinks in supermarkets have been found to contain more than 70 additives, many linked to behavioural problems, asthma, rotting teeth and insomnia. Although the additives have been certified safe in small quantities, critics say they may have altered effects when they are mixed together. Dr Vyvyan Howard, toxicologist at the University of Liverpool, said: 'A number of these substances are related very closely to transmitter substances in the brain, with the way nerve cells talk to each other. If you interfere with that, you interfere with brain function.' (Daily Mail; Daily Mirror)

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### 3. ANTIBIOTICS

#### **US: Organic produce 'virtually free of pathogenic bacteria'**

A study published in the Journal of Food Protection shows that organic produce was more likely to have fecal contamination from manure used as fertilizer, but was virtually free of pathogenic bacteria. Also, *certified* organic farms were significantly less likely to have fecal contamination than *non-certified* organic farms. The researchers from the University of Minnesota in St. Paul say their findings contradict the myth that organic produce is more likely to cause illness than conventional produce. (SA 25/5)

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### 4. GMOs

#### **UN: FAO backs GM foods**

Genetically modified crops were given a cautious endorsement as a means of solving world hunger by the UN's food agency yesterday. The backing, from the Rome-based UN Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO), is at variance with the views of many leading aid agencies, which say that such claims made for GM are misleading. The FAO was at pains to point out that benefits from GM developments had still not reached small farmers or the world's poor, because the technology was so far concentrated on a few lucrative cash crops such as soya beans, rather than on staples such as potatoes. But it gave a favourable view of GM as a whole. Its report - "Agricultural Biotechnology: Meeting the Needs of the Poor?" - continues the UN's position of recognising the potential of

transgenic crops to help fight world hunger, while stressing that case-by-case studies were needed to assess the risks. Its general view of the subject, however, is positive. It says that GM crops currently on the market are safe to eat, and notes that scientists disagree on their environmental impact - accepting genes from GM crops can be transferred to wild species. However, it says scientists differ on whether that in itself is a bad thing, and says that what is needed most is more research to assess the environmental consequences of the so-called "gene flow." The report also points out environmental and health benefits from GM crops, claiming that an associated reduction in pesticides and toxic herbicides has had "demonstrable health benefits" for farm workers in China. (The Independent; Financial Times)

### **Argentina: Negative effects of GM soya documented**

An investigation, by Daily Mail reporter David Jones, details the catastrophic effects that GM soya is causing in Argentina:

- Pesticides used to control GM soya 'superweeds' are devastating small farms and causing health problems, it is claimed
- The rush to produce soya crops, and nothing else, is robbing the soil of its richness
- Some 300,000 farm workers have lost their jobs as giant GM soya farms become the norm
- In 1971, just 93,000 acres of arable land in Argentina were used for soya bean production. Over 30 years later, there are 30 million acres, 99 per cent of which is GM.

### **World: Monsanto puts GM wheat on hold**

Monsanto, the US biotechnology company, yesterday shelved plans to introduce GM wheat into world markets after admitting there was too little demand for the product.

The move – a significant reversal of company strategy – follows strong consumer and farmer resistance to GM wheat in Europe and North America. This year, the Canadian Wheat Board warned that any introduction of GM wheat could devastate its wheat industry. Monsanto has spent seven years and hundreds of millions of dollars developing the product. (The Financial Times; The Guardian; Daily Mail; The Times)

### **US: New anti-GM book launched**

Scientists are "nowhere near" understanding the health and environmental impacts of genetically modified crops, a leading critic from the United States has warned Westcountry audiences this week. Jeffrey Smith, founder and director of the Institute for Responsible Technology in the US, is in Britain

to promote his new book *Seeds of Deception - Exposing Corporate and Government Lies about the Safety of Genetically Engineered Food*. Mr Smith claimed there were numerous instances where results of laboratory tests showing negative effects of GM crops had been manipulated or covered up completely. "Any one of those individual studies should be sufficient to stop this dangerous technology until thorough investigations have taken place," he said. "Taken together, they paint a picture that is worthy of very serious concerns. We are nowhere near the level of understanding to be able to protect human health and the natural environment. Unfortunately, we are already feeding this technology to millions of people and released it into the environment where it can never be recalled. It is a strategy that is really, really risky."

### **EU: GM sweetcorn imports to be allowed**

The EU is to approve the sale of a brand of GM corn for human consumption - ending a six-year ban that was challenged by the US. The landmark decision by the European commission will allow the insect and herbicide-resistant Swiss-made product to be sold, even though consumer resistance remains powerful. But growing Syngenta Bt-11 maize in the EU's 25 member states will remain illegal for the moment. Under new EU rules, canned vegetables have to be clearly labelled as having been harvested from a GM plant, the commission's chief spokesman, Reijo Kemppinen, said yesterday. Since many supermarket chains require suppliers to guarantee that their products are GM-free, the product is unlikely to be a huge success. The biotech industry trade group, EuropaBio, welcomed the announcement, but conceded that the corn was unlikely to be on sale soon. Although the Commission says that the sweetcorn should be clearly labelled as a GM product, Friends of the Earth has lashed out against the decision, saying that it is likely to strengthen opposition to GM foods and crops in Europe. Grain from the GM maize line Bt11 has been authorised for import into Europe since 1998 and is widely used in the EU in feed and in derived food products, such as maize oil, maize flour, sugar and syrup, snack foods, baked foods, fried foods, confectionery and soft drinks. In justifying the decision, Commissioner for Health and Consumer Protection David Byrne said: "*GM sweet corn has been subject to the most rigorous pre-marketing assessment in the world. It has been scientifically assessed as being as safe as any conventional maize. Food safety is therefore not an issue, it is a question of consumer choice.*"

The Commission is in the firm belief that it has a clear and transparent system, which champions the consumer and gives them the choice as to whether or not they wish to buy GM food products. It says that extensive research and fieldwork has now been completed, proving that there is no risk to human health or the environment. In response to the Commission's decision, UK-based environmental group Friends of the Earth spokesperson Adrian Bebb said: "*The European Commission is gambling with the health of European consumers. Member states remain divided over the long term safety of this GM sweet corn, yet the Commission wants to force it down our throats. The public won't swallow this arrogance. Hostility to GM food and crops is*

*likely to grow, and public confidence in EU decision-making will be damaged."*

Representing companies such as Monsanto, the United States trade mission to the EU said it welcomed the decision to approve Sygenta's sweetcorn, although it added that the approval of one GM food would not mean an end to the much criticised biotech moratorium. (FoodNavigator.com 21/05/2004)

**The US said yesterday it would maintain its challenge against the European Union over restrictions on imports of genetically modified products.** The US administration has long argued that it wants to be certain that approval of Bt-11 is not a one-off event. Nine other GM food products are awaiting clearance. (Financial Times SA 23/5)

### **US: Hypocrisy over GM food**

Steven Druker, a US public interest attorney who directs the Alliance for Bio-Integrity, explains why **America is being hypocritical over GM produce:** 'although US law mandates that foods with new additives (such as GM foods) be proven safe, Food and Drug Administration files confirm such evidence is lacking and experts have declared that no GM food has been demonstrated safe. 'By emphasising these facts, the EU could highlight the US's hypocrisy and blunt the force of its lawsuit [filed at the World Trade Organisation against the European Union's restrictions on GM products]. Rather than withering under the US demand for proof that GM foods are harmful, EU officials should turn the tables and demand that the US honour its own laws by proving they are safe.' (Financial Times) [More information can be found at [www.biointegrity.org](http://www.biointegrity.org)]

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## **5. BSE**

### **UK: BSE crisis draws to an end (?)**

Fall out from the BSE crisis that hit the UK meat industry in the 1990s could be nearly over as the EU's food safety body paves the way for British beef to move down from its 'high risk' classification. The [European Food Safety Authority](#) (EFSA), whose job it is to assess risk in food, said this week that British beef will soon be downgraded to a 'moderate BSE risk', the same as meat from the rest of Europe. Between November 1986 and November 2002, 181 376 cases of the fatal cattle disease Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy (BSE) were confirmed in the UK. Following a request from the European Commission the EFSA scientific panel on biological

hazards (BIOHAZ) examined the UK's application to be considered as a "moderate BSE risk" according to the standards of the World Organization for Animal Health (OIE1). *"The panel concludes that the UK will reach the threshold that will enable it to be considered as a "moderate BSE risk"1 country at a date no later than December 2004,"* said the authority in a statement. Causing millions of euros in lost revenues, and costing the UK taxpayer an estimated £4.6bn, the 'mad-cow' crisis in the mid-1980s struck down UK farmers, as countries blocked British beef imports over contamination fears.

BSE, a transmissible, neurodegenerative, fatal brain disease of cattle, has been linked to the human disease variant Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease (vCJD). According to the [World Health Organisation](#) (WHO) from October 1996 to November 2002, 129 cases of vCJD were reported in the UK, six in France and one each in Canada, Ireland, Italy and the US. The scientific panel has published its findings but it is now up to the European Commission to take the decision to bring UK beef into line with the EU-wide "moderate BSE risk" category. British beef exports are currently classed as "high risk" incurring stiff restrictions for UK farmers. The UK's National Farmers' Union welcomed the news, saying it "reconfirms the effect of the UK's BSE controls and shows that BSE is in rapid decline," and opens the way for the UK to export like all other member states. For a country to be labelled a "moderate risk" it must post less than 200 BSE cases per one million adult cattle. (Foodnavigator.com 14/05/2004)

### **UK: Thousands more CJD cases possible**

While official numbers show human cases of mad cow disease have been tapering off, new research published Friday indicates Britain may be facing thousands of new, previously undetected cases. Using a mathematical extrapolation, scientists determined that up to 3,800 additional cases may be found in the United Kingdom, where the human form of the fatal brain disease terrified the population and hobbled the beef industry following its discovery in the mid-1980s. The researchers based their findings on the discovery of potentially infectious proteins in appendix and tonsil tissues removed from 12,674 patients between 1995 and 1999, well after many of the 153 cases of variant Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease (vCJD), the human variant of mad cow, were detected. Among those samples, the researchers found three that contained aberrant prion proteins, thought to be the cause of vCJD. The disease is believed to be transmitted by eating meat from cows infected with bovine spongiform encephalopathy; both ailments create holes in the brain and result in death. Based on those findings in the British population, the researchers arrived at a potential number of 3,808 people with possible incubating cases of vCJD. Like many diseases, vCJD can take years to manifest itself in a patient, and is thought to grow more dangerous as someone consumes more infected tissue. The disease is most frequently found among patients in their 20s and early 30s, so the majority of samples for the study were taken from people aged 20 to 29.

The study's authors urged caution in drawing conclusions from their findings, which were reported in the Journal of Pathology, but they and other researchers noted that the discovery may point to additional cases not yet found, and to a much longer incubation period for vCJD than previously thought. "Our findings need to be interpreted with caution, but cannot be discounted," David Hilton, of Derriford Hospital in Plymouth, England, and the report's author, told Reuters. The findings also highlight the difficulty in tracking a disease like vCJD, and the scant knowledge of its true incubation period, which some scientists believe could be 30 years or more. The researchers wrote that their findings could indicate "a future increase in numbers of vCJD cases or a significant number of individuals with a 'carrier state,'" meaning the patients may have some infected tissue but will never get sick with vCJD. (Jon Bonné, MSNBC 21/5/04)

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## 6. NUTRIENT CONTENT

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## 7. HEALTH & DIET

### **UK: Anti-cancer effects of vegetables studied**

Further evidence that eating vegetables protects against cancer was unveiled yesterday. Professor Ian Johnson, of the Institute of Food Research, said millions of people put themselves at increased risk of cancer because they do not appreciate the benefits of eating fruit and vegetables. His research shows that certain chemicals in brassicas kill colon cancer cells in the same way as anti-cancer drugs. Lab tests showed that a chemical called allyl-isothiocyanate (AITC), which is released when the food is chopped, cooked or chewed and gives these vegetables their bitter flavour, stops the uncontrolled division of cancer cells that allows tumours to grow. (Daily Mail; The Sun; Daily Telegraph)

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## 8. RESEARCH

### **US: Organic research funding announced**

The United States Department of Agriculture Cooperative State Research, Education, and Extension Service (USDA CSREES) has announced the availability of \$4.7 million in fiscal year 2004 for the new Integrated Organic Program which has two program areas: the Organic Transitions Program, and the Organic Agriculture Research and Extension Initiative. Together, the two programs will fund integrated research, education, and extension projects that address critical organic agriculture issues, priorities or problems. The deadline for applications for both program areas is June 10, 2004. More information is available at <http://www.csrees.usda.gov/fo/fundview.cfm?fonum=1141>

### **EU: Research institute FiBL now with English online pages**

The Research Institute of Organic Agriculture FiBL, Frick (Switzerland) and FiBL Berlin e.V. (Germany) are leading competence centres for organic agriculture research and consultancy in Europe. FiBL Frick, founded back in 1973, is the world's largest research establishment for organic agriculture. The close links between different fields of research and the rapid transfer of knowledge from research to advisory work and agricultural practice are FiBL's strengths. FiBL Frick employs over 100 members of staff with a volume of project funding totalling some EUR 8.5 million in the year 2003. The German sister institute FiBL Berlin was founded in 2001.

<http://www.fibl.org/english/index.php>

### **EU: Project for organic food quality launched**

An EU project on Quality Low Input Food (QLIF) from organic agriculture started on 1 March 2004. In this five-year project, the European Union is sponsoring 32 public and private institutes and SMEs with the aim of improving the quality of organic food and pushing innovations in organic agriculture. See

<http://www.fibl.org/aktuell/nachrichten/2004/0323-eu-oeko-lebensmittel.php>

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## 9. PROMOTION

### **US: Organic standards preserved (for now)**

The US government is winning praise from the organic food industry for dropping

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guidelines that would have allowed limited use of pesticides and antibiotics in such products. The guidelines had come under criticism by trade groups and lawmakers because they were perceived as weakening organic standards and undermining consumer confidence in the Agriculture Department's organic certification. In rescinding the guidelines, Agriculture Secretary Ann Veneman ordered the department's Agricultural Marketing Service to work with organic officials "to determine the best solutions to the issues that have been raised." The service is in charge of the National Organic Program, which oversees the department's certification of organic foods. Veneman's action is "refreshing," said Jim Riddle of Winona, Minn., chairman of the National Organic Standards Board, a 15-member panel that advises the department. Veneman directed department officials to listen to the board; Riddle said the department often has not heeded its recommendations. Riddle said he looks forward to helping establish effective processes to protect the program's integrity. He said the board could issue its recommendations on the guidance when it meets Oct. 12-14 in Washington.

Under the guidance, organic farmers could have used pesticides that contain inert chemical ingredients if a "reasonable effort" failed to determine what the ingredients were. The department also would have let milk be sold with the department's organic seal if it came from a cow that had been treated with antibiotics, provided the cow had been antibiotic-free for 12 months. The guidance would have allowed ground fish as a protein supplement in livestock feed. A scientist at Consumers Union in Yonkers, N.Y., Urvashi Rangan, said the provisions weakened the value of the label, and she cited fishmeal as an example. Fish are not certified as organic, and some fish contain mercury and other chemicals, she said. The executive director of the Organic Trade Association, Katherine DiMatteo, said Veneman's action was "exactly what we wanted." DiMatteo said any future clarifications of the organic standards ought to meet consumer needs. Consumers must believe the standards "mean something," said Sen. Patrick Leahy, D-Vt., who wrote the 1990 organic food production law. He commended Veneman for listening to the organic community and retracting "far-reaching changes." (The Associated Press May 27th )

### **Czech Republic: Organic Action Plan launched**

The Czech Republic government, at its meeting on March 17, 2004, approved the Czech Republic Organic Action Plan to the year 2010. The Action Plan has six priorities: relationship between organic farming and environmental protection and animal welfare; strengthening of consumers trust and promotion of organic food; processing and marketing; entrepreneurship and economic viability of organic businesses; research, education and consulting; and political measures and instruments.

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## 10. POLITICS

### **Canada: Schmeiser loses battle with Monsanto**

Canadian farmer Percy Schmeiser has lost his battle against Monsanto as Canada's Supreme Court found in favour of the US-based biotech giant in a patent infringement case. The Supreme Court of Canada ruled that Schmeiser infringed on Monsanto's patent for Roundup Ready canola, which Monsanto claimed Schmeiser had planted 1,030 acres of without paying the required license fee. The case dates back to 1997, when Monsanto found the genetically modified canola growing on Schmeiser's farm. Schmeiser claimed the canola was growing there by accident, having either been blown there by a passing truck or arriving by cross-pollination from neighbouring fields. However, the court said there was insufficient evidence that Schmeiser intentionally made use of Monsanto's technology by spraying his crop with Roundup, and therefore both sides would have to pay their own costs. (Just-food.com – 24/05/04)

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