

Good PR is Growing

By Lyle Stewart

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If you've watched television or read a newspaper at all in the past couple years, you're likely familiar with the biotechnology industry's "Good Ideas Are Growing" television advertising series, broadcast repeatedly whenever the controversy over genetically engineered foods flares up.

Sponsored by the Council for Biotechnology Information, the spots rely on soothing, dreamlike imagery: sun-drenched green crops surrounding an old-fashioned barn on the prairie; a healthy, tanned farm family rocking gently on a rope swing; a sturdy Third World peasant at work in fields of bounty.

It's a relatively straightforward, almost facile attempt to project images of health, prosperity and good corporate citizenship.

But few Canadian consumers are aware that the Good Ideas Are Growing campaign is only one part of a multi-pronged public-relations campaign to sell genetically engineered foods in Canada and abroad, one largely funded by taxpayers themselves over the past two years.

They include other bromides such as "A Growing Appetite For Information," a pamphlet produced by the Guelph-based Food Biotechnology Communications Network as a insert in Canadian Living Magazine. The pro-GE brochure "Food Safety and You" was mailed to every household in Canada by the biotech industry's ostensible regulator, the Canadian Food Inspection Agency, last year. Meanwhile, seemingly independent non-governmental organizations, such as the Consumers' Association of Canada and the National Institute for Nutrition, have conveniently backed the hands-off federal policy on labelling.

At the same time, Ottawa has stonewalled the growing demands for mandatory labelling of genetically engineered foods with a Canadian General Standards Board committee whose carefully chosen membership and terms of reference forestall any possibility that we may soon be able to choose whether or not to consume GE foods.



The Liberal government also ignored the Royal Society of Canada report it requested on how to deal with food biotechnology. And they buried senior Liberal MP Charles Caccia's private member's Bill C-287 on labelling biotech foods.

These episodes may appear to be unconnected battles in the propaganda war over biotechnology. But thanks to the dogged investigation of Canadian Health Coalition researcher Bradford Duplisea, it's now becoming clear that they have been coordinated as part of a multimillion dollar strategy industry to engineer consent in Canada and abroad on biotechnology. Working almost single-handedly from his "war room," a file-filled office in his Hull apartment, Duplisea has unearthed a remarkable series of documents under Access To Information requests that have exposed a spider's web of influence; web that brings together the biotech and agri-food industries, large grocery distributors, a prominent public-relations firm, several federal government departments, and a handful of third-party NGOs funded in equal measure by taxpayers and industry to push the pro-GE message on Canadians.

There's no clear line between government and industry," says Duplisea. "As far as biotechnology is concerned, the government should be implementing and enforcing regulations, period. The industry should be left to promote itself. You must keep promotion and regulation of industry under different roofs or you get disasters like bad blood and Mad Cow disease.

There's no clear line between government and industry," says Duplisea. "As far as biotechnology is concerned, the government should be implementing and enforcing regulations, period. The industry should be left to promote itself. You must keep promotion and regulation of industry under different roofs or you get disasters like bad blood and Mad Cow disease. If the Krever Commission taught us anything, it's that we have to regulate in the interests of the public, not in the interests of the regulated."

But Ottawa now spends over \$400 million each year in research, development and public relations as part of a decade-long effort to turn Canada into a biotechnology powerhouse. It is a partner with Monsanto Canada in the development of GE wheat. Outside the university campuses in Guelph and Saskatoon - the two largest centres of biotech research in Canada - it's an investment that's little known and less understood, however. Indeed, some Ottawa insiders say the federal government is the ag-biotech industry.

For the businessmen and bureaucrats, all was sailing along fine until the late 1990s. But the spring of 1999 was a worrying time. Groups such as Greenpeace Canada and the Council of Canadians had launched campaigns against GE foods that were raising public awareness. Consumers and advocacy groups were waking up to the fact that the sudden appearance of genetically modified foods on their grocery shelves had taken place with little notice, debate, or independent and verifiable long-term testing.

And for Ottawa, which had hopes of exploiting vast new export markets, the prospect of a European-style revolt over GE was a nightmare scenario. That's why federal Agriculture Minister Lyle Vanclief convened an extraordinary - and secret - roundtable meeting for April 12, 1999. Invited were many of the stakeholders: representatives from the PMO; the Canadian Food Inspection Agency; and big players from the biotechnology industry, including Novartis head Byron Beeler and then-Monsanto Canada president Ray Mowling. Also invited were the communications specialists - Joyce Groote of the industry lobby group BIOTECanada and Diane Weatherall of the Food Biotechnology Communications Network. Many of the propositions that came out of the meeting were realized over the following two years, largely thanks to hidden taxpayer dollars.

According to Groote's notes, the meeting "helped to highlight the need for immediate coordinated action to deal with this crisis at hand.... I would like to suggest that a Task Force with a short reporting timeframe be established to develop the framework of a National Communications Strategy. We have moved from issues to crisis mode. This likely translates into a 2 year window to deal with the communications issue."

Groote's wishlist was granted. Under the coordination of the giant PR firm Hill and Knowlton, four industry groups formed the Task Force on Food Biotechnology in the fall of 1999. Since then, Ottawa has spent at least \$10 million and possibly double that amount on a multifaceted communications strategy to promote food biotechnology.

But Ottawa and its corporate partners faced a problem. As Groote observed, the "industry is not seen as credible." (Despite that lack of credibility, Ottawa has supported BIOTECanada with almost \$6 million over the past several years.) Still, neither could Ottawa appear to be abandoning its regulatory role. The one journalist invited to the meeting - Canadian Living Magazine associate editor Anna Hobbs - had a solution. "Based on my experience with the food safety concerns surrounding Alar and the apple industry," she wrote to Vanclief, "communication is most effective when government and industry partner with a credible, independent third party that, in consumers' perception, does not have the vested interest of a stakeholder."

Hobbs went on to pitch the \$300,000 insert deal in Canadian Living that appeared amid much controversy a year later. As Hobbs pointed out, credible front organizations needed to be created to counter perceptions that the effort is not simply a marketing con job.

Murray McLaughlin, the CEO of Foragen Technology Ventures, pounded the point home in another letter to Vanclief, dated April 28, 1999. "We need a champion to convey the information to the public while at the same time bring the industry together," McLaughlin wrote. "A possible vehicle for the communications component is the Food Biotechnology Communications Networks (FBCN)."

The FBCN portrays itself as a neutral purveyor of "balanced, science-based facts about food biotechnology and its impact on our food system." Conveniently, Ottawa and the biotechnology sector were already very friendly with the group, splitting the FBCN's budget between them. As Duplisea's research shows, the FBCN is only one - though a crucial - part of a vast backroom campaign to push GE foods on an unwilling public, both in Canada and internationally. It's a prime example of the third-party technique, and one at which the FBCN is adept.

Take a 1997 funding application form completed by FBCN Executive Director Diane Weatherall for the Agri-Food Trade 2000 program in Vanclief's ministry of agriculture. It argues that improved international public acceptance is "crucial to the export of commodities containing production of transgenic varieties such as canola, soybeans and corn initially but ultimately most grains, oilseeds, special crops and horticultural crops...."

It goes on to claim this promotional role is part of a "factual and balanced" information campaign. As an arms-length organization, the FBCN is positioned as the "source of credible, impartial information to the ultimate decision maker, the consumer."

Nonetheless, according to the agriculture ministry's "Project Assessment Consultation," the department's policy branch had some reservations about public gullibility toward the organization (which was then known as the Food Biotechnology Centre, or FBC). "There could be concern about the 'neutrality' of FBC," the policy wonks write. "Throughout the application the FBC comes across as pro-biotechnology. Is there a danger of a public perception of FBC as a voice of industry rather than a source of factual unbiased information?"

Despite the worries, the FBCN has received at least \$750,000 in taxpayer funds to set up a "regional network of experts," and to produce pro-biotech materials - including information directed at elementary school students and teachers, grocery clerks and dietitians - since 1997. The FBCN also provides shelter for corporate orphans. A document entitled "Dietitians Food Biotechnology Network - FBCN Proposal," describes the Guelph group's takeover of the Dietitians Food Biotechnology Network from Monsanto Canada. It was kept in government files because taxpayers funded the transfer.

"Monsanto Canada Inc. established the Dietitians Network in 1995 in recognition of the important role that dietitians could play in providing an information link between the agri-food system and food and nutrition issues, and building public understanding of food biotechnology," the document explained. "Since then, they have provided this group with financing, opportunities for exposure and on-going education, with the result that the Network has become a valuable communications vehicle. Two growing disadvantages to the current situation involve the threat to the dietitians' credibility due to their financial link to Monsanto and the on-going costs of administering the network for a single company."

And together with the Consumers' Association of Canada, the FBCN produced the Canadian Living insert, "A Growing Appetite for Information" under the hidden direction of the Canadian Food Inspection Agency, which edited the material.

The CAC is another useful organization in Ottawa's biotech battle. CAC Vice-President Jennifer Hillard appears frequently in the media to back the federal position against the mandatory labelling of GE foods. But Duplisea has discovered that Ottawa has supported the CAC to the tune of \$1.3 million since 1998, and has encouraged corporate trade associations to follow suit.

According to a 1998 letter from Insurance Council of Canada President George Anderson to Duff Conacher of Democracy Watch, several trade associations have come to the rescue of the CAC, which was then facing financial troubles, at the request of then-Industry Minister John Manley. "We were happy to be part of this effort," Anderson wrote, "as our own internal surveys show that the CAC retains a high level of public recognition and trust."

Perhaps the most egregious abuse of that public trust has been on the biotechnology issue. When Lee Anne Murphy was working as a CAC spokesperson, she explained to the Canadian Grains Council why the organization opposes mandatory labelling of GM foods. "We do not feel that the label is a place for public debate," she said. But Canadian consumers have consistently supported mandatory labelling of GM foods to the tune of 95 per cent in polling over the past five years. Provincial CAC sections in Alberta and British Columbia are aghast at the national body's position on labelling, which also flies in the face of international consumer organizations. But Monsanto Canada was so pleased with Murphy's efforts at the CAC that the corporation hired her as director of public affairs.

The third-party technique is also highly effective for the federal government when it doesn't want to act as voters demand. Agriculture Minister Lyle Vanclief invariably invokes the CAC whenever he is asked to explain government inaction on a file that the agri-food industry opposes.

For Greenpeace GE food campaigner Holly Penfound, the cozy community of corporate scientists, government bureaucrats and professional lobbyists is taking on a sinister hue. "To me, I almost see it as if the Canadian government is operating like a cult," she says. "There is this mantra of how biotech is safe and the Canadian regulatory system is safe and how everything is based on sound science - all those key words we keep hearing no matter which individual you happen to be talking to. I find it scary that these people are the ones we are relying on to protect health and the environment. Especially when you hear from the Royal Society of Canada report that there are real concern over the conflict of interest created by the fact that the Canadian government both regulates and promotes biotechnology."

Along with the Canadian Health Coalition, Greenpeace Canada has helped fund Duplisea's series of ATI requests. It's been money well spent. Penfound thinks they will help expose Ottawa's abandonment of its duty of industry oversight.

"Well, I would say in fact we are in the business of promoting biotechnology and paying lip service to the regulation of it," she observes. "Some of the behind-the-scenes things we've seen in those documents make it clear. The Canadian government is in partnership with Monsanto to create GE wheat. So how can we trust the government to make an objective decision based on sound science about the health and environmental risks of GE wheat when we are a partner in its development?" It's a question Ottawa has yet to answer. ☘

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Canada's GE Octopus

The tentacles of Canadian biotech intersect and overlap with dozens of corporations, government departments, NGOs, university faculties and insider media. Here's an abridged who's who of the Canadian ag-biotech community:

Byron Beeler, President, Novartis Animal Health Canada. Acted as Agriculture Minister Lyle Vanclief's front-man in organizing and chairing the Agriculture Minister's Roundtable in Communications and Agricultural Biotechnology April 12, 1999. The Novartis CD-ROM, "A Short Course on Biotechnology," is distributed by the Food Biotechnology Communications Network (FBCN), the Guelph-based communications clearinghouse for the food biotech industry.

Bart Bilmer, Canadian Food Inspection Agency (CFIA), federal agency under Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada, created in 1997 with the dual function of performing food-safety inspections and promoting food trade. A voting member of the Canadian General Standards Board (CGSB) committee on the Standard for the Voluntary Labelling of Foods Obtained or Not Obtained Through Genetic Modification. CFIA funded and oversaw the FBCN's "Growing Appetite for Information" insert in Canadian Living Magazine.

Alex Campbell Jr., President, Canadian Federation of Independent Grocers (CFIG). The CFIG is a member of the Task Force on Foods from Biotechnology, represented by Hill and Knowlton. Voting member of CGSB committee. CFIG is a member of the FBCN.

Michael Coates, president and CEO, Hill and Knowlton Canada. Since autumn, 1999, chairs Task Force on Foods from Biotechnology, a Toronto-based industry umbrella organization consisting of the Food and Consumer Products Manufacturers of Canada, the Canadian Council of Grocery Distributors, the Canadian Federation of Independent Grocers and the Canadian Federation of Agriculture. Helped organize defeat of Charles Caccia's private member's Bill C-287 on mandatory labelling of GE foods.

Jeanne Cruikshank, Vice-President, Atlantic Region, Canadian Council of Grocery Distributors (CCGD). Chair of the FBCN. Voting member, CGSB committee. Voting Member of the Task Force on Food Biotechnology, represented by Hill and Knowlton.

Laurie Curry, Vice President - Public Policy and Scientific Affairs, Food and Consumer Products Manufacturers of Canada (FCPMC), Don Mills-based industry organization representing 180 companies. Member of the Task Force on Food Biotechnology in Canada, represented by Hill and Knowlton. Voting member of the CGSB committee. Attended the Agriculture Minister's Roundtable in Communications and Agricultural Biotechnology in April 1999.

John Dossetor, Vice-President, Government Affairs, Monsanto Canada. Took Monsanto job in February, 2001, weeks after leaving post as senior policy advisor to then-Health Minister Allan Rock. Involved in the 1999 deal that gave swift regulatory approval of two types of Monsanto's "New Leaf" potatoes, over the objections of CFIA officials who disputed the "extremely poor" field tests of the seeds. Attended the December 17, 1999 Minister's Roundtable.

Joyce Groote, President BIOTECCanada. Attended the Agriculture Minister's Roundtable in Communications and Agricultural Biotechnology in April 1999. BIOTECCanada is a voting member of the CGSB committee.

Suzanne Hendricks, co-chair of the Canadian Biotechnology Advisory Committee (CBAC). Former President and CEO of the National Institute for Nutrition (NIN). Former Head of Food Programs in the Health Protection Branch, Health and Welfare Canada. NIN is a member of the FBCN and a voting member of the CGSB committee. Completed a consumer report for the CFIA in 1999 on voluntary labelling of GE foods.

Anna Hobbs, Associate Editor, Canadian Living Magazine. Attended the Agriculture Minister's Roundtable in Communications and Agricultural Biotechnology in April 1999. Proposed to Minister Vanclief a creation of a supplement to run in Canadian Living to deliver information on food biotechnology directly to readers and subscribers of the magazine. Prints the CFIA supplement 'What Am I Eating? Consumers, Producers and Genetically Modified Foods' in October, 1999 issue. Inserted the FBCN brochure "A Growing Appetite for Information" on food biotech in its November 1999 issue.

Jennifer Hillard, Vice-President, Consumers' Association of Canada (CAC). Member of the FBCN board of directors. A voting member of the CGSB Committee. The CAC receives funding from both CFIA and Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada.

Nick Jennery, President, Canadian Council of Grocery Distributors (CCGD). CCGD funded by government to set up CGSB committee on voluntary labelling. Attended the Agriculture Minister's Roundtable in Communications and Agricultural Biotechnology in April 1999.

Anne Kennedy, National Institute of Nutrition (NIN). A voting member of the CGSB Committee. NIN is a member of the FBCN.

Margaret Loveys, Senior Prime Minister's Office staffer detailed to GE issues. Attended a meeting October 11, 1999 with CFIA and CGSB officials to discuss the CGSB labelling initiative. Also attended the Dec 17, 1999 Minister's Roundtable.

Peter McCann, President, Ag-West Biotech. Attended the "Canadian Biotechnology Strategy (CBS) roundtable in Saskatoon" in 1998. Attended the Agriculture Minister's Roundtable in Communications and Agricultural Biotechnology in April 1999.

Ray Mowling, President, Council for Biotechnology Information. Former president, Monsanto Canada. Member of the FBCN. Member of the Communications Advisory Council at the National Institute of Nutrition. Attended Agriculture Minister's Roundtable in Communications and Agricultural Biotechnology in April 1999. Ex-officio advisor to Canadian Food Information Council (CFIC).

Lee Anne Murphy, Director, Public and Industry Affairs, Monsanto Canada. Serves on board of directors of the CFIC. Former voluntary labelling proponent at the Consumers Association of Canada. Past chair of the CGSB Committee. Served on FBCN board of directors.

Peter Phillips, Co-chair, Canadian Biotechnology Advisory Committee. Professor, Chair in Managing Knowledge-based Agri-food Development at the University of Saskatchewan, College of Agriculture. Editor, Agbio Forum. Research program concentrates on issues related to intellectual property rights, market access and consumer attitudes toward food biotech. Co-Director of the Canadian Agri-food Trade Research Consortia and a founding member of the International Consortia on Ag-bio Research (Rome).

Lynn Stewart, Food Bureau, Market and Industry Services Branch, Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada; Assistant Director, Regulatory Issues, Functional Foods and Nutraceuticals, Food Bureau, Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada. One-time member of the board of directors of the FBCN; also described as ex officio member of the Board. Voting member of the CGSB voluntary labelling committee.

Gordon Surgeoner, President, Ontario Agrifood Technologies (food biotech trade association and lobby vehicle based in same building as FBCN at Guelph). Environmental biology professor, University of Guelph. CGSB committee voting member. Former chair of the FBCN.

Lyle Vanclief, Federal Minister of Agriculture, whose department has funded most of the PR battle over food biotechnology.

Diane Wetherall, Executive Director, FBCN. Attended the Agriculture Minister's Roundtable in Communications and Agricultural Biotechnology in April 1999. Voting member, CGSB committee.