

Feds, consumers' association help market GM foods

Federal government funnels money to Consumers Association of Canada

By Aaron Freeman

OTTAWA--The federal government has been funnelling money to a national consumers group to help the biotechnology industry market genetically modified (GM) foods to the public.

The Consumers' Association of Canada (CAC) has taken a pro-industry position on biotech issues, especially on the high-profile issue of labelling of GM foods.

Consumers and most non-governmental organizations, by and large, favour mandatory labelling of genetically modified foods, which would give them a choice of whether or not to purchase them.

Biotech companies have argued that they should be allowed to decide whether or not they want to label their products as containing GM ingredients.

In the past, Jenny Hillard, formerly the national vice-president of issues and policy at the CAC, has said the organization favours the industry position of voluntary labelling.

The organization's current president, Mel Fruitman, is slightly more equivocal. "We want labelling, but how that labelling is to occur is another question," he says.

In failing to call for mandatory labelling, the CAC is virtually alone among consumer groups active on the issue.

The organization's position on labelling, combined with its tight relationship with biotech companies and federal agencies that have been promoting GM technology, have led many to criticize the CAC as nothing less than an industry front group.

The organization has received support from government departments that are seen as cosy with the biotech industry, including Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada and Industry Canada, which in the late-1990s gave the industry lobby group BIOTECCanada \$6-million to improve the image of biotechnology. The CAC has also received support from biotech companies such as Monsanto, and the organization's former spokesperson on biotech issues, Lee Ann Murphy, left the CAC to work for the company.

Access to information documents obtained by Ottawa-based researcher Bradford Duplisea now suggest that among the \$1.3-million in government assistance given to the CAC between 1997 and 2002, the group was given a grant in 2000 to conduct market research to help the biotech industry sell its message and image better to Canadian consumers.

Among the aims of the project, according to the proposal submitted by the CAC, were to "assess the accessibility, readability, transparency and accuracy" of industry biotechnology information sources, "identify industry perceptions about consumer concerns and needs," and "recommend changes in approach and communication styles."

Internal departmental briefings state the CAC wanted to do the project because, "The CAC thinks consumers don't really know what biotechnology is."

The \$82,000 grant came from two government sources, Industry Canada's Office of Consumer Affairs and Agriculture Canada's Agri-Food Trade program.

Normally, the program is a matching program, meaning that at least one quarter of the funding for a project must come from sources outside government. Because the grant was fully funded by government sources, bureaucrats had to gain special approval from Assistant Deputy Minister Denise Boudrias.

One departmental official expressed concern about the proposal, stating "I don't think this proposal falls under the scope of AFT2000, which is, I believe, export oriented." He further noted that "the current AFT2000 budget is badly over-subscribed. For this reason, I am suggesting that the department pass on this proposal." However, another document states that the project "is a priority for the DM's office," and it is clear from departmental correspondence that senior officials were geared toward approving it.

Other departmental staff were leery about the pro-industry bias of the project, or at least the appearance of bias. "I'm concerned about the slant of the proposal," stated a Communications Branch official when the proposal was being assessed. "That line about the CAC working with the biotechnology industry, kind of imperils their third-party, status, doesn't it?"

Quotes by the official reveal the cosy relationship between the Agriculture Canada, the biotech industry and the CAC, and how they view the CAC's role in stage-managing the biotech debate. "I would want the piece redrafted so that the reader understands that first and foremost the CAC's interest is that of the consumer. It's okay that the CAC's findings would be of interest to the biotechnology industry, and it's OK to expect that people in the biotechnology industry would see it as in their interests to cooperate with CAC researchers, but the overall impression should be that the goal is to benefit consumers."

Another official from the Research Branch wrote, "Having a third-party group like the CAC with no vested interest in biotech, plan and carry out the research lends credibility to the results. The fact that this is consumers doing consumer research is not only optically positive, but substantially positive as well."

"The public is mistrusting of biotech business, which they see as pursuing the profit motive exclusively," the official added. "The research and review by CAC on the type of information that is available to consumers will help biotech companies to determine if the industry has done all it can to supply consumers with relevant information to enhance consumer understanding of food biotechnology."

The project examined several information sources, and asked focus groups to provide feedback on how to tailor each one better. The first source was a booklet entitled "A Growing Appetite for Information," funded by Agriculture Canada and published by the CAC and the Food Biotechnology Communications Network, one of several industry-funded information dissemination groups. While the pamphlet bills itself as a "bias-free zone" on biotech issues in Canada, and it lists several organizations that advocate mandatory GM labeling, it strongly emphasizes the benefits of various biotech products, and parrots the industry line advocating voluntary labelling.

The second information source, AGWest Biotech, has as its official mandate to "initiate, promote and support the growth of Saskatchewan's agricultural biotechnology industries."

The study also examined Agriculture Canada's information material. Perhaps not surprisingly, focus group participants felt that "government had a tendency to present only certain pieces of information rather than make all information available to the consumer so they could make their own decisions," a sentiment that is at the heart of the GM labelling debate.

Spokespeople at Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada had no comment on the market research project.

CAC President Mel Fruitman says his organization receives "very little" government support. He was not familiar with the project, which was conducted before he began his tenure at the organization. After being given a description of the project, he said that while he did not know who was involved in the project, "there may be a distinction between the objectives of the organization and the objectives of certain individuals."

The CAC is in the midst of an internal civil war over the GM issue. Mandatory labelling is advocated by the organization's global affiliate, Consumer's International, which has groups in 115 countries worldwide. Even some of the CAC's own provincial wings are opposed to the national office's position.

Bruce Cran, a member of the CAC's national board of directors from British Columbia, says provincial affiliates like the B.C. Consumers' Association have come out against voluntary labelling. "We disagree with national on that one," he says. "You've got to have a mandatory policy."

He says the national office hopes that voluntary labelling may eventually lead to mandatory labelling, a position that "hasn't gotten us anywhere so far."