The GMO Debate in the Media, and Why Labeling Matters More Than Ever

Wenonah Hauter, Executive Director

You’ve seen the headlines calling GMO critics “out of step” with science. National Geographic and others have lumped people concerned about GMO safety with climate deniers and people who think the moon landing was faked. But what’s really happening here? The biotech industry and its advocates in academia are using their resources and clout to broadcast the myth that there is scientific consensus on GMOs when, in fact, no such consensus exists.

Even popular “science guy” Bill Nye mysteriously revised his outlook on controversial GMO technology — and it’s especially hard to dissociate his reversal from this PR blitz since it coincided with his recent trip to Monsanto’s headquarters. Monsanto has poured millions of dollars into public relations efforts to sell the public on GMOs. Does this mean that it’s game over for the GMO labeling movement or that we should trust Monsanto’s word? Of course not. In fact, it means we should be more suspicious than ever.

But our supporters know the debate over GMOs isn’t just about GMOs. It’s about the current and future state of our food system — who grows and sells our food, how it’s marketed and what technologies were used to produce it. By selling seeds to farmers, peddling pesticides, forming corporate monopolies and funding academic research on GMOs, agribusiness giants like Monsanto have one goal in mind: controlling the food system. The millions of people calling for labeling of GMO foods have a problem with that.

While it’s disappointing to see journalists and prominent public figures like Bill Nye being captured by industry and muddying the debate on labeling, we’re motivated to keep on fighting because we believe in the right to know what’s in our food.

California’s Drought

California, the nation’s fruit and vegetable basket, is in the fourth year of a drought crisis so severe that a NASA scientist warned that the state may have just one year of water left in its reserves.

Agriculture accounts for 80 percent of California’s annual water use, so that seems like the right place for Governor Jerry Brown to look for solutions. Instead, Governor Brown has ordered residents and municipalities (which use just 15 percent of the state’s water) to cut use by 25 percent or face stiff fines.

Big Agriculture, so far, faces no restrictions. Industrial almond producers — which in the last five years have doubled production in the arid western San Joaquin Valley — vow to plant even more trees and pump more precious groundwater to increase a windfall that results from exporting 70 percent of this premium product to foreign markets.

Big Ag will keep growing thirsty alfalfa, which uses more water than any single crop in the state, to both export and feed dairy cows on water-polluting factory farms.

(continued on page 2)
SPOTLIGHT: Two Florida Victories

Fracking

In April, Food & Water Watch and its allies celebrated the defeat of two pro-fracking bills in Florida that would have allowed new, unconventional forms of drilling into the Sunshine State. One of the bills would have authorized new fracking operations that use more than 100,000 gallons of fluids, while also barring local communities from enacting their own local bans like we’ve seen in many other states. The other fracking bill would have allowed the industry to withhold disclosure of fracking chemicals under “trade secrets” provisions.

A solid network of environmental advocacy groups and grassroots activists, however, organized resistance against these terrible bills for over a month, highlighting that this legislation left the state vulnerable to fracking in places like the Florida Everglades. The coalition generated hundreds of calls and thousands of letters to state legislative offices demanding that Florida be kept frack-free, while numerous op-eds and letters to the editor ran in news outlets, all showing that the public was truly against fracking. In late April, our own op-ed was featured prominently in the Miami Herald, calling on state legislators to vote against supporting the bad bills.

In the last days of the legislative session, the coalition worked around-the-clock to educate lawmakers about the numerous health and environmental impacts that Florida would face if the bills were passed. We and our allies helped generate over 250 calls into Tallahassee offices in the last two days before a final vote was scheduled, forcing the sponsor of the bill to remove it due to an insufficient number of votes. Like in New York and Maryland in the last few months, this victory showed that our movement can win against the oil and gas industry. Our coalition is already poised to move forward with a campaign to ban fracking in Florida permanently!

GMO Mosquitoes

Since 2012, Food & Water Watch has worked closely with local activists to oppose the controversial field trial proposed by British company Oxitec that would release genetically modified (GMO) mosquitoes in the Florida Keys. While Oxitec claims the GMO mosquitoes would reduce the possibility of dengue fever — even though there haven’t been any cases of the disease in five years — the company has not provided evidence to support the claim that they would effectively control dengue, and the health and environmental risks are still unknown. A recent call-in day to the local Key West officials generated 351 calls in opposition to the release, and helped to put pressure on the Mosquito Control Board, the agency responsible for overseeing the field trial of the insects. The Board chose to postpone its scheduled vote until the Food and Drug Administration releases an environmental review of the project.

California’s Drought (continued from page 1)

Brown also has given a free pass to the oil industry, which uses 82 billion gallons of water a year in California — enough to supply the cities of San Diego and San Francisco. And, Nestlé continues to pump millions of gallons of California groundwater to bottle and sell for 1,000 times what it pays for it.

To address the drought, Governor Brown must immediately rein in agricultural groundwater pumping, and place immediate moratoria on fracking and water bottling. Groundwater must be managed as a public resource, not as a giveaway to corporate water abusers.
Legislation to Ban Fracking on Public Lands Re-Introduced

On Earth Day, Congressmembers Mark Pocan (D-WI) and Jan Schakowsky (D-IL) re-introduced legislation originally filed at the end of last year to ban fracking on all federal lands. This bill is the strongest anti-fracking measure introduced in Congress, and, as this goes to press, it has now been sponsored by 17 other members.

The Protect Our Public Lands Act addresses the very real threat that fracking poses to our national parks, forests and other shared public areas. Potentially impacted areas include the Everglades, Chaco Canyon, George Washington National Forest and Glacier National Park. Beyond the localized impacts of fracking, this legislation is a strong measure to combat climate change, given the significant impact that fracking for oil and gas has on the climate.

In the lead-up to the introduction, Food & Water Watch supporters sent thousands of messages to Congress and made hundreds of phone calls to key targets. Our organizing team also spearheaded a national sign-on letter with allies, which ultimately was joined by over 400 organizations in support of the bill.

Given the current make-up in Congress, this bill will not pass anytime soon, but getting more members to support it will help shift the national debate around fracking, develop much-needed champions in Congress who can stand up to industry supporters, and continue to help build our growing movement to ban fracking and shift to a renewable energy future.

In the last quarter, working with our allies at the national, state and local level, we achieved the following victories:

- Defeated “Ag-Gag” bills in Colorado and New Mexico, and a bill in New Mexico that would have made it harder for neighbors to sue a factory farm for odor and other impacts.
- Blocked an attempt in the Nebraska legislature to take away authority of local governments to regulate the siting of factory farms.
- In February, the meat industry dropped its lawsuit to block changes to the rules for country-of-origin labeling for meat that give consumers more accurate information about their food. We and several farmer organizations had intervened in the lawsuit last year to defend the labeling program.
- After we documented the negative impact that the Sysco-US Foods merger would have on the food system and consumers, in February the Federal Trade Commission sued to block the merger, which would have created a national monopoly controlling three-quarters of the foodservice delivery market.
- Blocked approval of a water bottling proposal in Kingston, New York.
- Stopped water privatization proposals in Columbia, South Carolina and Mt. Vernon, Illinois.
- Defeated a pro-privatization bill in New Mexico that, among other things, would have included jail time for anyone failing to pay their water bill.
- Passed an ordinance banning fracking waste in Washington, Connecticut.

(continued on page 4)
DARK Act Update

Rep. Mike Pompeo (R-KS) has re-introduced a bill in Congress this session that would prohibit state efforts to require labeling of genetically engineered foods (GMOs).

This is Monsanto’s dream bill — it would allow corporations that make and use GMOs to continue to keep quiet about them, and it would keep the rest of us in the dark (in fact, some of our allies are calling this the DARK, or Denying Americans the Right to Know, Act). States that have already passed GMO labeling laws, including Vermont, Maine and Connecticut, could be prevented from implementing their laws to require labels.

Over 90% of Americans support the labeling of GMOs. So why does this bill exist?

The Grocery Manufacturers Association (GMA), an industry group that represents corporations like Monsanto, Nestlé and Dow, has been working with allies in Congress to get this bill re-introduced in the current Congress (after it failed to move when introduced last year). This is just one of the many ways that these corporations have tried to keep GMO labeling from becoming the law. In every state that has worked to pass labeling laws, the industry has spent millions of dollars to manufacture doubt and keep us from knowing what’s in our food.

But it is not up to corporations to decide whether you and I get to know what is in our food. We should be able to make informed choices about what we feed ourselves and our families. Learn how to take action by going to foodandwaterwatch.org.

Victories and Milestones (continued from page 3)

- Passed a two-and-a-half-year moratorium on fracking through both houses of the legislature in Maryland, which became law in May (see page 6).
- Passed resolutions opposing fracking in several Florida counties and cities including Miami-Dade County, Florida’s largest, and defeated two fracking bills in the state legislature (see page 2).
- Actively opposed and defeated a bill in the Colorado state legislature that would have forced local communities to pay money to mineral rights owners for banning fracking.
- Overwhelmingly defeated (68% to 32%) a measure in Hermosa Beach, California that would have lifted a ban on oil drilling.
- Continued to make progress on campus through our Take Back the Tap program, with Rider University, UNLV and University of Colorado students securing funds for filling stations; eliminating water bottles at the University of Santa Cruz’s graduation and replacing them with sustainable solutions; and convincing the University of Colorado marching band to stop using disposable plastic water bottles.

MILESTONES

- Generated 27,000 public comments (68,000 with allies) opposing the Port Ambrose liquefied natural gas (LNG) facility, urging Governors Cuomo and Christie to veto the project; delivered a coalition letter signed by 217 groups in 24 states.
- With grassroots allies across the state, launched the statewide coalition Coloradans Against Fracking and the Don’t Frack Denver Campaign.
- With partners, launched the Bakken Pipeline Resistance Coalition to oppose the Bakken pipeline, which would transport oil through South Dakota, Iowa and Illinois.
- Delivered 63,000 messages to Congress opposing fast track of the Trans-Pacific Partnership.
- Sent 116,045 letters to Congress asking them to oppose the DARK Act and support labeling of GMOs.
- Sent 21,064 comments to the Obama administration asking them to ban offshore oil drilling.
LOCAL PARTNER GROUP: Padres & Jóvenes Unidos

By Pam Martinez, Co-Executive Director

Padres & Jóvenes Unidos is a grassroots, multi-generational organization led by people of color who work for educational excellence, racial justice for youth, immigrant rights and quality health care for all. We believe that being healthy is a human right. This basic democratic right needs to be fought for, which is why we joined the Don’t Frack Denver campaign. Multi-racial unity is necessary to construct a movement strong enough to push back and stop oil and gas companies from fracking near communities of color and poor white communities in Colorado and its most populated city, Denver. Communities in Colorado that were unaware of fracking’s terrible health consequences have suffered from higher risk of cancer, birth defects and lower birth rates. We have come together to prevent this in Denver, for there is no such thing as safe fracking.

It’s no accident where oil and gas companies decide to frack. Across the country, research has shown that the higher the number of families of color and working class families, the higher the number of wells. In Northeast Denver — where a real estate developer is leasing out land next to homes and schools for fracking — the community is two-thirds African-American and Latino. These are the same communities that disproportionately face many inequities, such as poverty, being part of the working poor and lacking access to good schools, higher education, health care and transportation. In most instances, these communities aren’t organized and have little political power. As a result, they are easy targets for fracking and stand in sharp contrast to wealthy communities that never directly experience the lethal impact of fracking.

We are proud to join with Food & Water Watch in the Don’t Frack Denver campaign to stop fracking. We’ve spoken at rallies, turned out our members at coalition events to target Denver’s mayor and spoken to the media about the structural inequality that allows fracking next to communities of color in Denver and beyond. In doing so, we’ve joined a diverse coalition and growing movement of faith leaders, craft breweries, labor unions and environmental groups to stop fracking in Denver.

We all deserve clean water and air. It is both a right and a responsibility to protect everyone’s health and Mother Earth when she is under attack. And so, it is in this spirit that Padres & Jóvenes Unidos has joined this Don’t Frack Denver Campaign and is honored to do so.

The Food & Water Watch Board of Directors

In addition to the critical support that our members provide, Food & Water Watch relies on the guidance and direction of a strong and diverse Board of Directors. With expertise ranging from food policy to human rights, and experiences in environments as diverse as kitchens and courtrooms, all the members of our board are bound by their passion for protecting our most precious resources, and making sure that government at all levels prioritizes the needs and safety of people over corporate profit. The combined decades of experience that they bring from their respective fields has helped Food & Water Watch to recognize its own role as a champion for healthy food and clean water for all.

This June, the board will be meeting at our Washington, D.C. office to review our progress so far in 2015, and to help our program staff map out strategies for continued success through the rest of the year and beyond. A significant part of this meeting will be determining how much of our budget we can commit to our campaigns to stop fracking across the country, label GMO food and support the wide range of other projects that members like you make possible.

You can find more information on our board members in the “About” section on our website: foodandwaterwatch.org.
Monumental Movement in Maryland to Stop Fracking

At the end of March, the Maryland General Assembly passed a bill, originally introduced by Delegate David Fraser-Hidalgo and Senator Karen Montgomery, that would prohibit any permits from being issued for fracking in the state for two-and-a-half years. The bill became law at the end of May after Governor Hogan announced he would not veto it.

Before this session, it was commonly believed that any legislation to halt fracking would never move through the legislature. But more than 100 groups came together and worked tirelessly to empower Marylanders to fight for a long-term moratorium on fracking. This Don’t Frack Maryland campaign brought together more than 100 Western Maryland business owners and also has sent over 25,000 messages to legislators supporting a moratorium. Letters signed by more than 100 health professionals and more than 50 restaurant owners, chefs, winemakers and farmers from across the state were also delivered to the legislature.

Even actor and Maryland native Edward Norton helped the effort, providing a radio ad appealing to the governor to sign the bill. If the bill becomes law, fracking cannot come to Maryland until October 2017 — unless we keep the momentum going and continue to heed the will of Marylanders who do not want to frack their home.

IN HER OWN WORDS

Michele Merkel
Co-Director, Food & Water Justice

The factory farm issue found me as a young attorney when I worked at the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). Family farmers from Missouri asked the agency to engage in a lawsuit against mega hog operations that housed 2.5 million hogs a year. The pollution from these facilities fouled the community’s air and water and made people sick. I believed in the EPA’s mission to protect human health and the environment, and I worked hard on the case. But in the middle of the litigation, I walked into work one morning and was told that I had to settle the case quickly or drop it altogether, and I also had to stop all other investigations that I had initiated against other factory farms.

I talked about this formative moment in a speech that I gave at TEDx Manhattan this year. It was a sobering but good lesson to learn early in my career: that justice and fairness aren’t a given, but are something for which we must constantly fight, even in the United States. I quit working at the EPA over this case; now I sue them, because without such external pressure, it will remain difficult for citizens to obtain justice.

It is important to engage the judicial branch of government as a vehicle for positive change, but it is not enough on its own. One of the reasons why I love working at Food & Water Watch so much is that we never file cases in a vacuum. Our cases are always a component of a bigger campaign that involves the active engagement of an informed and mobilized citizenry who hold our elected officials accountable. People power will always win, even over monied interests.

Food & Water Watch is also unique in its willingness to take on the difficult cases that need to be brought to safeguard our threatened food and water systems. And I am proud to stand next to citizens in this work who often put their lives on the line. I was honored to share the TEDx Manhattan stage with some of these citizen heroes who still inspire me today.
Get Active for Food & Water Watch!

Food & Water Watch is now an official beneficiary of Climate Ride, a 501c3 nonprofit organization that hosts life-changing charitable events to raise awareness and support sustainability, active transportation and environmental causes. Participants commit to a multi-day bike ride or hike and then designate Food & Water Watch as their fundraising beneficiary. Along the way, participants are sure to get their heartbeat up, meet like-minded riders and enjoy breathtaking scenery.

For our first year, we hope to have teams riding in the Climate Ride Northeast and Climate Ride Midwest adventures. The Northeast ride on September 17-21 begins in Bar Harbor, Maine and ends in Boston, Massachusetts. Climate Ride Midwest starts in Grand Rapids, Michigan on September 27, with a final stop in Chicago, Illinois, and takes place on September 30. Start training today!

For more information or to sign up as a rider, visit www.climateride.org or contact Aliya Mejias at amejias@fwwatch.org or 202-683-2462.

Buy This Fracking Album

Food & Water Watch was pleased to partner with Movement Music Records on Buy This Fracking Album, a 24-track, two-disc benefit compilation featuring Bonnie Raitt, Michael Franti, Indigo Girls, John Butler Trio and many more artists lending their voices in an effort to shed light on the dangers of fracking. Released in June, proceeds from the album will benefit grassroots organizations around the country working to ban fracking. Food & Water Watch, which is an album beneficiary, is donating its share of the proceeds into a fund that album producers will distribute to grassroots organizations.

CAROL WOULD LOVE TO TALK TO YOU!

Carol Cook, Food & Water Watch Member Specialist, talks on the phone for a living. If you’re a Food & Water Partner (a monthly supporter of Food & Water Watch) or are thinking about becoming one, chances are you’ll get to chat with Carol at some point.

Carol discusses current and urgent issues with our Partners, such as our efforts to ban fracking, make GMO labels the law and stop the overuse of antibiotics on factory farms. In that process, Carol seeks to build relationships with supporters.

Of her work, Carol says, “I love my job because it allows me to connect with so many wonderful people who truly care and are passionate about protecting our food, our water and our communities. I enjoy talking with people because I learn so much from them, which enhances my life.”

Not only does being a Food & Water Partner allow you to make a real difference with only a small monthly commitment (which you can cancel at any time), it also gives you a chance to chat with one of our friendliest, most enthusiastic staff members!

If you would like to become a Partner in our work, or to learn more about the program, please visit foodandwaterwatch.org/become-monthly-partner.
Fighting Fast Track Authority on Trade

Congress introduced legislation this spring to give the president fast track authority to negotiate the Trans-Pacific Partnership — a massive proposed trade deal that would undermine food safety and facilitate more fracking. This was a much-anticipated move, and Food & Water Watch has been working with allies across the country to build opposition.

Our supporters made over 4,000 calls to Congress within days of the bill’s introduction, and our organizers — working out of our 17 state offices — have been working in key congressional districts across the country, organizing rallies, participating in forums and meeting with members and their staffs. In North Carolina, we helped organize a town hall meeting and press conference urging Rep. David Price to oppose fast track; in Illinois, we generated phone calls, delivered letters and joined with allies to bird-dog Rep. Mike Quigley; and in New York, we helped organize a panel featuring Nobel Prize-winning economist Joseph Stiglitz to urge Rep. Joseph Crowley to oppose fast track.

As of this writing, fast track legislation has passed out of the House and Senate trade committees, but the fight is far from over. Two of the members we had been pressuring — Rep. Mike Thompson (CA) and Rep. Charlie Rangel (NY) voted our way — and we are confident that we can win this fight as we continue to work with our partners to escalate the campaign.