

# Open season?

## To the editor:

In the September issue, your editorial entitled “A tragic GM ‘outing’” comments that “those who embrace GM crops must do it openly, as democratic society demands. Otherwise, activists will exploit secrecy to foment public mistrust, portraying themselves as heroes exposing covert GM planting operations.”

I waited for the other shoe to drop. Does not society in the shape of government and the police have a duty to protect and defend from attacks by vandals and other fanatics those going about their legitimate business—as Claude Lagorse was doing?

Would those vandals not have attacked the farm if details had been widely published? Were those secret vandals after M. Lagorse’s secrecy or his crops?

You went on: “Ultimately, transparency and openness will make the continued destruction of property and intimidation of farmers difficult to justify.” In your view, does that mean that such destruction and intimidation is presently justified? Would you be happy if those intimidators ransacked the premises of *Nature Biotechnology* for publishing what they saw as ‘pro-GM material’? Should you therefore not be more open, inviting those very intimidators, qualified or not, to be part of your editorial process?

After all, they attack GM crops with little or no knowledge of agriculture—just as little as they doubtless have of biotech in general.

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1. Anonymous. *Nat. Biotechnol.* **25**, 950 (2007).

## *Nature Biotechnology* responds

*Nature Biotechnology* unequivocally condemns the illegal actions of those who engage in intimidation and who vandalize legitimate cultivations of transgenic crops on private property. Those who are involved in such criminal acts should be prosecuted under the judicial system.

Our editorial sought to address the problem that round-the-clock police

protection and surveillance of transgenic crop plantings is impractical, given the resources and time involved. Given the difficulties faced by police and the rather mixed track record of the judicial system

in handing down stiff sentences to those found guilty of such offenses, how then should open democratic societies, such as France, respond to a small but significant minority who persist in this type of criminal activity?

Our answer is that any tacit public support that exists for such individuals should be marginalized to the extent that the actions of such people are

no longer tolerated. Make no mistake, this is a battle for the hearts and minds of the public, and biotech must clearly be on the side of the angels. In this regard, openness and transparency are key. Making the locations of trials of transgenic crops secret or even opaque merely plays into the hands of activists by making it appear that the government and the growers have something to hide.



Unfortunately, recent statements from the French environment minister, Jean-Louis Borloo, have suggested that his government may acquiesce to pressure for a moratorium of GM crops from José Bove and his acolytes. According to the French newspaper *Le Monde*, a freeze is reportedly planned on all transgenic crop trials<sup>1</sup>. In September, French representatives to the European Council of Ministers also abstained from voting on the import approval of three transgenic maize lines; the veto could hinder current negotiations on the extension of approval for MON810 corn—currently the only transgenic crop approved for cultivation in France.

As *Nature Biotechnology* went to press, a public consultation process about transgenic crops was underway in 15 French cities and on the internet. In addition, a working group on genetically modified organisms has been set up to discuss new legislation oriented towards transparency and the freedom of choice for farmers and for consumers and potentially the establishment of an independent national advisory body.

1. Jakubyszyn, C. & Kempf, H. *Le Monde* 20 September (2007) <<http://www.lemonde.fr/web/article/0,1-0@2-3244,36-957270@51-951150,0.html>>

# GMO quantification in processed food and feed

## To the editor:

Reliable quantification of genetically modified organisms (GMOs) in food and feed is mandatory to fulfill European Union (EU) Regulations on the labeling of products containing GM ingredients over a 0.9% threshold—a threshold recommended to be defined as the ratio of genetically modified and unmodified haploid genomes<sup>1–4</sup>. A major challenge of these regulations is that they also require the labeling of highly processed products “containing, consisting or produced from GMOs,” where DNA is absent or heavily damaged and therefore



difficult to detect and quantify<sup>2</sup>.

Huge efforts are underway to develop and officially validate tools for GMO analysis. Polymerase chain reaction (PCR) and real-time PCR have become the methods of choice for GMO detection and quantification. It is possible to extract high-quality DNA for GMO analysis from raw materials like seeds or from Certified

Reference Materials (CRMs). Unfortunately, many processed food and feed products are often non-optimal sources of DNA<sup>3</sup>: food processing procedures often result in DNA fragments as small as (or even smaller than)