

GATES FOUNDATION HIRED PR FIRM TO MANIPULATE UN OVER GENE DRIVES

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The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation this year paid a PR firm called Emerging Ag² \$1.6 million to recruit a covert coalition of academics to manipulate a UN decision-making process over gene drives, according to emails obtained through Freedom of Information requests.

Gene drives are a highly controversial new genetic extinction technology. They have been proposed as potentially able to eradicate malarial mosquitoes, agricultural pests, invasive species, as well as having potential military uses³.

Emerging Ag calls itself "a boutique international consulting firm providing communications and public affairs services." Its president and founder is Robynne Anderson, a former international communications director of CropLife, the global lobby group for the biotechnology, seed, and pesticide industries⁴.

The FOIA emails reveal that the project coordinated by Emerging Ag was dubbed the "Gene Drive Research Sponsors and Supporters coalition"⁵. It consisted of three members of a UN committee called the Ad Hoc Technical Expert Group on Synthetic Biology (AHTEG) plus a larger group of 65 covertly recruited, but seemingly independent, scientists and officials, all coordinated by a still larger number of government officials (mainly from English-speaking countries), PR advisors, academics, and members of various Gates-funded projects.

The AHTEG on Synthetic Biology is part of the UN Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD). This AHTEG is tasked with creating a formal set of regulatory recommendations to help governments avoid negative impacts on biodiversity. Its recommendations are supposed to draw from the discussions of an online forum of experts called The UN CBD Online Forum on Synthetic Biology.

The three AHTEG members who coordinated with Emerging Ag are Dr. Todd Kuiken of North Carolina State University, Robert Friedman of the J Craig Venter Institute⁶, and Professor Paul Freemont of Imperial College, London. The first and last represent teams and institutions that have received at least \$99 million dollars between them from the U.S. military and U.S. foundations, including Gates, to develop and test gene drive systems.

¹ Latham, Jonathan. "Gates Foundation Hired PR Firm to Manipulate UN Over Gene Drives." *Independent Science News | Food, Health and Agriculture Bioscience News*. Last modified December 4, 2017. <https://www.independentsciencenews.org/news/gates-foundation-hired-pr-firm-to-manipulate-un-over-gene-drives/>

² "Emerging Ag Inc." <https://emergingag.com/>

³ Thomas, Jim. "The National Academies' Gene Drive Study Has Ignored Important and Obvious Issues." *The Guardian*, June 9, 2016, sec. Science. <https://www.theguardian.com/science/political-science/2016/jun/09/the-national-academies-gene-drive-study-has-ignored-important-and-obvious-issues>

⁴ "Agricultural Retail and Technology News." *CropLife*. <https://www.croplife.com/>

⁵ "Index of /Webdump/Genedrivefiles." <http://www.pricklyresearch.com/webdump/genedrivefiles/>

⁶ "Synthetic Biology." *J. Craig Venter Institute*. <https://www.jcvi.org/research/synthetic-biology#team>

The CBD online forum on synthetic biology

According to the emails⁷, which were obtained from the University of North Carolina by Edward Hammond of Prickly Research⁸, the Gates funding for Emerging Ag was obtained to co-ordinate a “fight back against gene drive moratorium proponents.”

Funding for Emerging Ag first began after the last full meeting of the UN Convention on Biological Diversity, held in Cancún, Mexico in December 2016 which witnessed calls from Southern countries and over 170 international organizations for a UN moratorium on gene drives⁹. Adding to the pressure was a letter titled, “A Call for Conservation with a Conscience: No Place for Gene Drives in Conservation,” signed by 30 environmental leaders, including Jane Goodall. The letter asked for a “halt to all proposals for the use of gene drive technologies, but especially in conservation.”¹⁰

A primary function of Emerging Ag was to recruit academics. The primary task of the covertly recruited academics (those who were not on the inner circle of the AHTEG itself) was thus to stack the UN’s CBD Online Forum on Synthetic Biology. This forum was expected to discuss the wide scientific concerns about gene drives¹¹. The UN CBD process is the only multilateral process currently addressing gene drives.

Recruited academics received daily briefings and instructions from Emerging Ag on how to influence the discussion:

“My name is Ben Robinson, I work with Isabelle Coche & Delphine Thizy, and I will be sending you regular updates on the discussions taking place in the context of the CBD’s Open-Ended Online Forum on synthetic biology. I will monitor contributions and provide you with brief summaries of the content and tenor of conversations, while highlighting topics and posts you may wish to address. Should you feel that a topic needs to be addressed but you do not have the relevant resources or expertise, I can also help identify and coordinate those best suited among the group to respond to particular issues.”

The key role of the Gates Foundation

Delphine Thizy¹², cited in the email above, works at Target Malaria in London, England. Target Malaria is a Gates-funded project to use gene drives against mosquitoes¹³.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ “Prickly Research.” <http://www.pricklyresearch.com/>

⁹ Callaway, Ewen. “Gene Drive Moratorium Shot Down at UN Meeting.” *Scientific American*. Last modified December 22, 2016. <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/gene-drive-moratorium-shot-down-at-un-meeting/>

¹⁰ “A Call for Conservation with a Conscience: No Place for Gene Drives in Conservation,” September 2016. http://www.synbiowatch.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/letter_vs_genedrives.pdf

¹¹ Latham, Jonathan. “Gene Drives: A Scientific Case for a Complete and Perpetual Ban.” *Independent Science News | Food, Health and Agriculture Bioscience News*. Last modified February 13, 2017. <https://www.independentsciencenews.org/environment/gene-drives-a-scientific-case-for-a-complete-and-perpetual-ban/>

¹² “Agriculture and Food Systems Institute – Science to Enable Safe and Sustainable Agri-Food Systems.” <https://foodsystems.org/>

¹³ Swetlitz, Ike, and STAT. “A Revolutionary Genetic Experiment Is Planned for a West African Village – If Residents Agree.” *Scientific American*. Last modified March 14, 2017.

Emerging Ag's activities were overseen by Jeff Chertack who is Senior Program Officer of Global Policy and Advocacy at the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. He is a former public affairs executive from Ogilvy PR who previously represented biotech and pharma giants in Brussels. Chertack sat on the co-ordination team of Emerging Ag's "Gene Drive Research Sponsors and Supporters coalition"¹⁴ and is copied on several strategy calls and co-ordination phone calls¹⁵.

This is also not the first time that the Gates Foundation has used academics to influence public and private opinion on genetic engineering technologies, as witnessed by its funding of the Cornell Alliance for Science¹⁶.

Public Research and Regulation Initiative

The FOIA emails reveal that Emerging Ag also collaborated with a lobby group called the Public Research and Regulation Initiative (PRRI)¹⁷ that is little known outside the Convention on Biological Diversity.

PRRI has a related influence operation which predates the efforts of Emerging Ag. Its history of lobbying the UN Convention on Biological Diversity over GMOs is mentioned in emails sent to a Canadian official on the UN AHTEG¹⁸. In them, a PRRI member, Piet Vander Meer¹⁹, boasts about its 24/7 "backup operation" for "like-minded" government and industry experts who sit on the AHTEG.

The emails suggest that national government representatives of Canada, U.S., UK, Brazil and the Netherlands were being remotely assisted by PRRI during closed door discussions. To help PRRI the 'Gene Drive Research Sponsors and Supporters coalition' offered to approach US Department of Agriculture (USDA) contacts to find additional funding for PRRI's activities. The current funding sources of PRRI are not known but former funders include CropLife International, Monsanto and the US Grains Council²⁰.

<https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/a-revolutionary-genetic-experiment-is-planned-for-a-west-african-village-if-residents-agree/>

¹⁴ "20170601-Re_CBD Follow up - Reminder of Our Call Friday 2 June-240 (N0024131xC1D49)." Prickly Research, Gene Drive Files. http://www.pricklyresearch.com/webdump/genedrivefiles/20170601-Re_CBD%20follow%20up%20-%20reminder%20of%20our%20call%20Friday%202%20June-240%20%28N0024131xC1D49%29.PDF

¹⁵ "20170530-Re_CBD Follow up - Reminder of Our Call Friday 2 June-136 (N0024130xC1D49)." Prickly Research, Gene Drive Files. http://www.pricklyresearch.com/webdump/genedrivefiles/20170530-Re_CBD%20follow%20up%20-%20reminder%20of%20our%20call%20Friday%202%20June-136%20%28N0024130xC1D49%29.PDF

¹⁶ "Gates Foundation Grants Additional \$6.4million to Cornell's Controversial Alliance for Science." *Independent Science News | Food, Health and Agriculture Bioscience News*. Last modified November 1, 2017. <https://www.independentsciencenews.org/news/gates-foundation-grants-additional-6-4million-to-cornells-controversial-alliance-for-science/>

¹⁷ HOW PUBLIC ARE THE PUBLIC RESEARCH LOBBYISTS OF PRRI? Corporate Europe Observatory, Briefing for COP/MOP, Bonn, 2008.

<https://corporateeurope.org/sites/default/files/sites/default/files/resource/pri.pdf>

¹⁸ "FOIA CFIA Syn Bio – PRRI Back up AHTEG." *Gene Drive Files - Synbiowatch*.

<http://genedrivefiles.synbiowatch.org/foia-cfia-syn-bio-pri-back-up-ahteg/>

¹⁹ "Piet van Der Meer." *IPBO VIB-UGent*, n.d. <http://ipbo.vib-ugent.be/about-us/piet-van-der-meer>

²⁰ "U.S. GRAINS COUNCIL." <https://grains.org/>