

White House Refuses to Release Email From Monsanto-Linked Lobbyist

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The White House is withholding documents requested under the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) by an environmental group that suspects the Obama administration of working with Monsanto-linked lobbyists to defend the planting of genetically engineered (GE) crops in wildlife refuges across the country.

The information currently being withheld includes a portion of a January 2011 email that a top White House policy analyst received from a lobbyist with the Biotechnology Industry Organization (BIO), which represents GE seed companies such as Monsanto and Syngenta.

According to legal filings, the White House withheld the portion of the email because it accidentally contained information on BIO's lobbying strategy that, if released, would cause competitive harm to the group and the companies it represents.

"We suspect the reason an industry lobbyist so cavalierly shared strategy is that the White House is part of that strategy," stated Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility (PEER) staff counsel Kathryn Douglass, who is arguing the email should be a public record. "The White House's legal posture is as credible as claiming Coca Cola's secret formula was 'inadvertently' left in a duffel bag at the bus station."

Last July, PEER released a number of internal emails revealing that Peter Schmeissner, a senior science policy analyst and member of the White House's biotechnology working group, had corresponded with the BIO lobbyist about a legal challenge filed by PEER and its allies.

The PEER lawsuit had successfully halted GE crop plantings in wildlife refuges in northeastern states, and the group continues to challenge planned plantings in other regions across the country.

In the emails obtained by PEER, longtime biotech lobbyist Adrienne Massey asks Schmeissner if the "interagency working group" is addressing the PEER's legal challenges. Massey also forwarded environmental assessments of proposed GE crop plots at wildlife refuges in other regions of the country. These assessments could protect future GE crop plots in refuges from legal challenges.

The emails prompted PEER to request further information under FOIA on the interagency group, known as the White House Agricultural Biotechnology Working Group. According to PEER, the quiet and informal group includes top-level officials from almost every agency under the Obama administration involved in agriculture and trade, including the State Department, the Department of Agriculture (USDA) and the Environmental Protection Agency.

PEER is currently suing the White House for information withheld from the FOIA request,

including the Massey email and the working group's schedule, agenda items and work related to GE crops.

An affidavit filed by a BIO attorney claims the portion of the Massey email withheld from PEER contains industry trade secrets that were "mistakenly" forwarded to Schmeissner and, if released, would cause competitive harm to companies BIO represents:

"BIO operates in an advocacy environment in which there are many organizations that oppose the use of biotechnology, particularly in the agricultural arena, and that seek to persuade federal, state and local agencies to restrict the technology's use. If this information were released, competitors could imitate or seek to counteract BIO's strategy and further their own contrary agendas at the expense of BIO and its members."

In its own legal filings, the White House claims it rightfully withheld information under existing disclosure law.

PEER Director Jeff Ruch told Truthout that he suspects the Massey email details a effort by BIO lobbyists to have the White House ensure that environmental assessments of GE crops on wildlife refuges are strong enough to protect the projects from further legal challenges. Challenging these legally mandated assessments is a tactic often used by environmental groups like PEER to tie up controversial projects in court.

GE Crops in Refuges

Deborah Rocque, a US Fish and Wildlife official overseeing the wildlife refuge system, told Truthout in 2011 that the agency has allowed farming on refuges for years as part of habitat restoration efforts. Rocque said planting herbicide-resistant GE crops would allow conservationists to establish ground cover while killing unwanted weeds with herbicides.

PEER, however, claims the Obama administration is supporting the GE plots in wildlife refuges as part of an effort to boost exports. Several US trade partners, especially in Europe, are skeptical about GE crops, and some countries have banned certain GE seeds and exports. PEER contends that the White House working group's involvement indicates high-level interest in showing trade partners that the US government considers GE crops to be so environmentally safe that Americans plant them in wildlife reserves.

The US has also has put heavy diplomatic pressure in recent years on countries such as France and Spain to accept exports and GE crop technology, as revealed by WikiLeaks and several Truthout reports.

PEER filed its first legal challenge after being contacted by Fish and Wildlife biologists who opposed growing GE crops in wildlife refuges. PEER later obtained an internal email among Fish and Wildlife officials that the group believes is evidence that USDA Secretary Tom Vilsack has put pressure on Fish and Wildlife to support GE agriculture.

In the January 14 email, Interior Department Deputy Secretary David Hayes told top Interior

Department and Fish and Wildlife officials that Vilsack is "somewhat exercised that the Administration is not being consistent in supporting genetically engineered crops."

Rocque told Truthout that she was unaware of any internal pressure from higher-ups in the Obama administration.