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# GAIN Report

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## France

**Post:** Paris

### **International Scientists Respond to Uncritical Media**

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Biotechnology - GE Plants and Animals

Agriculture in the News

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**Report Highlights:**

Since September 19, a widely advertized study concluding that "GMOs cause cancer" has played heavily in French media. While the initial reaction from the press and policy makers was emotional and fearful, scientists have taken this opportunity to organize their reaction not only to the specific study, which was refuted by the European Food Safety Agency, but more generally to communicate their perspectives on public research and plant biotechnology. While the Government of France is likely to continue to oppose the adoption of new bioengineered products, it may also be obliged to reconsider and strengthen public research in this field.

### **General Information:**

The study results regarding the toxicological impacts on rats fed on herbicide-tolerant bioengineered corn and corn treated by an herbicide have played heavily in the French media since September 19, 2012. The study was conducted by a team of French researchers led by Dr. Gilles-Eric Seralini, whose opposition to bioengineered products is well-known (see GAIN report FR9111 Weak Science - Strong Political Position, dated September 21).

### Communication of the Study's Results – Strong Media Coverage

When released, the study's conclusions received heavy press coverage, including front page headlines illustrated with shocking photographs of rats with tumors. *Le Nouvel Observateur* carried the headline "Yes, GMOs Are Poison." As is the practice with science journalism, reporters were given access to the results prior to its publication on the condition that they not report about it until the study is published. The authors of the study also required reporters to affirm that they would not seek the views of any other experts prior to the study's publication. This highly unusual arrangement resulted in an uncritical first wave of media coverage that was largely uninformed by expert analysis.

### Scientists Reactions – Daily and Collective Reactions in the General Media

The international scientific community has massively and severely criticized the initial media coverage, the methodology, as well as the conclusions of the study. Subsequent domestic press coverage of that criticism has been muted. *Le Monde* ran an article September 25 that questioned Dr. Seralini's methodology, but noted that some who question the study were motivated by economic self-interests. On September 29, the weekly magazine *Marianne* published an article titled, "Shock Study on GMOs Triggers A World Outcry." France's National Center for Science Research (CNRS) petition, "For a Reasoned Debate on GMOs" has been signed by more than 200 international scientists. On October 4, *Le Figaro* published a full page article "Rats Fed on GMOs: The Underside of a Disputed Study." An Op-Ed by a famous philosopher and former Minister of Education "GMOs and the Scare of Ecologists," pointed to that there are too many exaggerated fears among France's population.

On October 4, Dr. Francois Houllier, recently appointed President Director General of the National Institute of Research in Agriculture (INRA), published a letter called "GMOs: What Role for Public Research?" posted on [INRA's website](#). That same day, *Le Nouvel Observateur* published a 2-page interview of Dr. Houllier. In both the letter and interview, Dr. Houllier denounced "the poison of fear and doubts" instilled by the Seralini study and insisted that public research through INRA is indeed active in plant biotechnology, citing the examples of environmental toxicity impact studies. Dr. Houllier underlined the light media coverage of INRA's work on plant biotechnology and regretted the increasing difficulty in conducting these research projects as a result of shrinking public funding as well as field trial destructions by anti-biotech activists.

On October 4, France's Association for Plant Biotechnology (AFBV) held its annual conference and organized a press conference to address specific questions on the Seralini study issue. AFBV disagreed with the methodology and conclusions of the study. They insisted that many other toxicological studies

(including long-term ones) had been made in the past on bioengineered products, all concluding to no significant health impact on animals. AFBV went on to express how public research cannot be adequately conducted on plant biotechnology due to the repetitive destruction of research materials and equipment by activists.

An open letter ([Seralini and Science – An Open Letter](#)), which points to the attacks on studies concluding to the risks of bioengineered products and countering biotechnology regulatory approaches in the European Union and in the United States, has circulated through social media. On October 3, 130 Non Governmental Organizations (NGOs) (including mainly local and regional groups, Friends of the Earth, ATTAC, the Ecologist political party, anti-biotech activists, and WWF) asked for the temporary ban of NK603 corn and RoundUp herbicide.

### Official Agencies Reject the Conclusions of the Study

Two official regulatory agencies have already reviewed the Seralini study and rejected its methodology and conclusions. On October 4, the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA) issued a [preliminary statement](#) announcing that after a preliminary investigation, the design of the study was found to be inadequate and the quality of the results insufficient to allow valid conclusions to be drawn. EFSA has requested of Dr. Seralini to provide more details on the study's design, to enable them to make a final determination by the end of this month. EFSA's statement has both made the evening news on national television and mainstream media outlets. EFSA's statement follows the review of the German Federal Institute for Risk Assessment ([BfR](#)), released the day prior, which concluded that the study contains flaws and is not grounds for new safety evaluations (see GAIN report GM12026, dated October 2). The French National Agency for Food, Environmental and Occupational Health and Safety (ANSES) is expected to finalize its review by October 20, and France's High Council on Biotechnology (HCB) will also release the conclusions of its review in coming weeks.

### Anticipated Political Decisions

Just as the results of the study were released to the public on September 19, the Ministers of Agriculture, Health and Environment tasked France's national authorities - ANSES and the HCB to review the study. The following day, the Prime Minister, stated that "if the danger of GMOs is confirmed, France will support their ban at the European level." The Government hasn't made any other public comments on this issue, possibly due to the massive reaction countering the study's conclusions.

As a result of the "Seralini drama," France could well ask for a stricter health impact assessment as part of the EU authorization process of bioengineered products (as called for by Member of the European Parliament and famous anti-biotech and anti-globalization activist José Bové in the daily newspaper *Libération* of October 4), as well as no new authorizations to cultivate genetically-engineered crops in the near future. On the other hand, economic reality, i.e., France's high dependence on imported bioengineered feedstock, is likely to force the Government to continue authorizing imports of these products, which are indispensable to the livestock and compound feed industries. Lastly, due to the high visibility of well-organized scientists in the media, a potential positive outcome of the study could be the launching of stronger public research on plant biotechnology.

