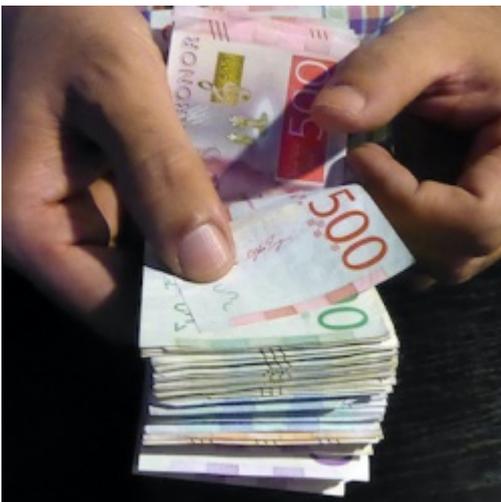


Year-Long Investigation Refutes Myth of 'Grassroots' Anti-GMO Activism



By Cameron English — May 9, 2020

Anti-GMO groups present themselves to the public as independent truth seekers fighting to build a healthy food system and counter the machinations of "powerful" corporations. A detailed investigation of who funds these groups, and how they spend their massive donations, paints a very different picture.



Credit: Jonn Leffmann / Wikipedia [1]

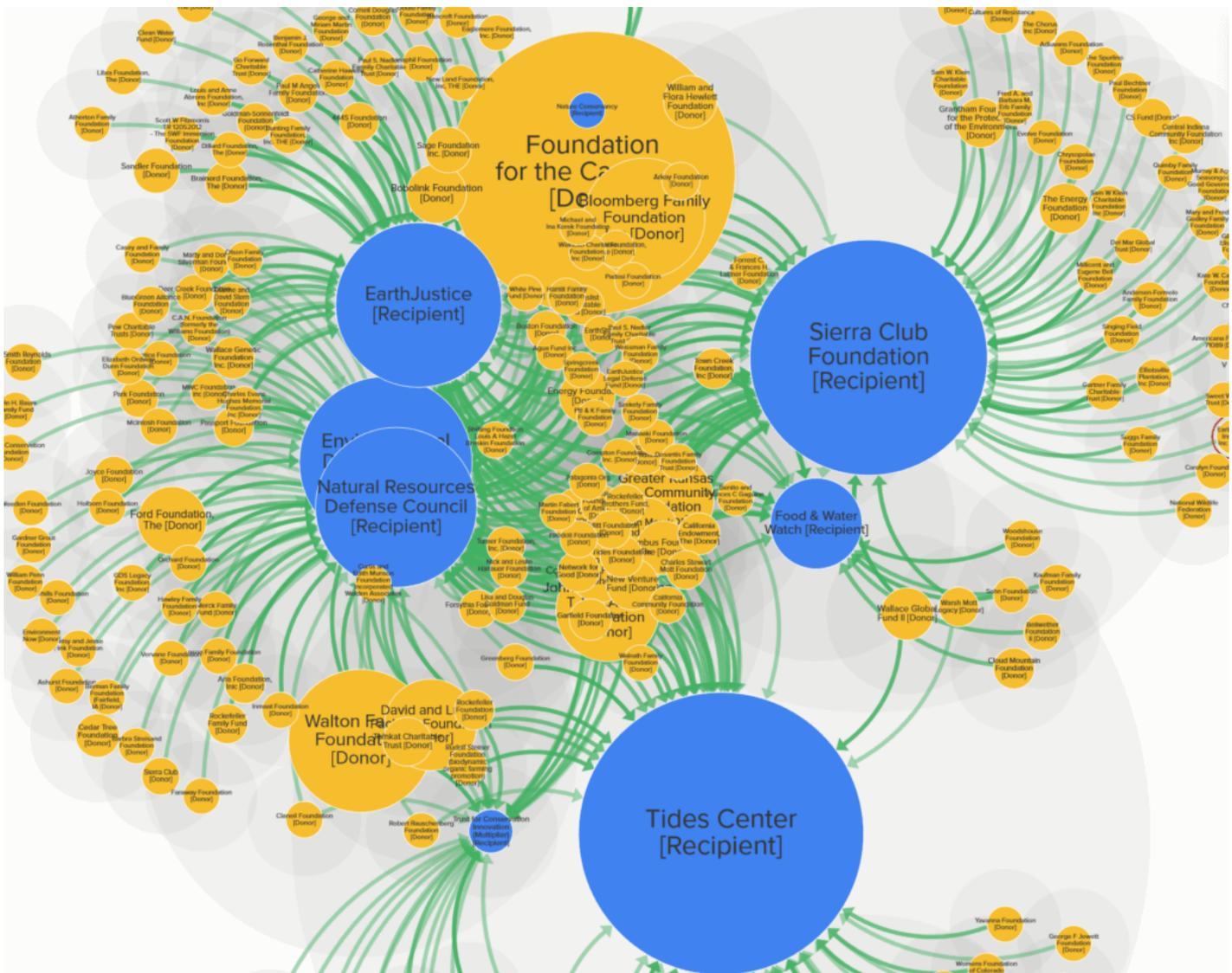
For many years, the anti-GMO movement has advanced a compelling narrative about its struggle against the biotech industry—pejoratively referred to as 'Big Ag.' According to this story, organic food activists and environmental groups are independent, grassroots rebels taking on the corporations that seek to control the global food supply with their patented GMO seeds and pesticides. It's a Biblical struggle as far as the activists are concerned: they're [David and the agro-chemical industry, led by Monsanto, is Goliath](#) [2].

This [Erin Brockovich](#) [3]-style narrative has undoubtedly convinced many Americans that the biotech industry is spending millions to promote its products, lobby Congress and silence its underdog critics. But as the Genetic Literacy Project (GLP) has documented in its just-released [Anti-GMO Advocacy Funding Tracker](#) [4], the David vs. Goliath framing is suspect at best.

Meet Big Organic

Based on a year-long investigation of [tax records and annual reports](#) [5] from hundreds of anti-GMO advocacy groups and their donors, the GLP tracker reveals that, instead of underdogs taking on the corporate establishment, many activist groups are highly skilled public relations operations with big budgets working to demonize crop biotechnology. Over the five-year period 2012-2016, anti-GMO groups received \$850,922,324 in donations from organic food companies and wealthy foundations.

The tracker features an [interactive network map](#) [6] illustrating the financial relationships between donors (yellow circles) and recipients (blue circles), as well as [exportable financial data](#) [5] and [detailed profiles](#) [7] of the top 50 organizations. All the data can be toggled by year and size of the organizations (top 10, 25, 50 etc.) (See this [article](#) [2] for an in-depth explanation on how to use the tracker.)



A network map depicting donors and recipients.

These nonprofit groups comprise a highly organized movement that promotes a similar message, shares many of the same donors and, in some cases, the same leadership. Veteran Greenpeace researcher Charlie Cray, for instance, sits on the [board of directors](#) [8] at [U.S. Right to Know](#) [9], an organic industry-funded activist group known for attacking biotech scientists as [agricultural industry "skills](#)

[10].” Likewise, the Environmental Working Group (EWG), creator of the infamous “Dirty Dozen” list, is funded by an industry lobbying outfit called Organic Voices Action Fund (OVAF). EWG [president Ken Cook](#) [11] sits on OVAF's board of directors.

Beyond the extensive latticework of activism laid bare by GLP's tracker, there are more illuminating facts consumers, policymakers and journalists should be aware of.

Big Organic Outspends The Biotech Industry

Anti-GMO activists are [wont to complain](#) [12] that the biotech industry has spent enormous sums of money lobbying politicians to block regulation of its genetically engineered seeds and pesticides. This is simplistic, since biotech and plant protection products are [tightly regulated](#) [13] by the FDA, USDA and EPA, at considerable cost to the industry. But the more important point is that the activist groups have spent far more on lobbying than 'Big Ag,' and the reason is simple, as [GLP points out](#) [14]:

“Based on the data we’ve been able to ferret out ... pro-GMO spending is sizable but remains a fraction of the expenditures of anti-GMO groups ... While anti-GMO groups spend hundreds of millions of dollars lobbying through the media and the internet to make their case that transgenic and gene-edited crops are unhealthy or unsustainable and therefore should be banned or labeled, biotechnology companies spend most of their money on product development.”

Pro-Science Foundations Fund Anti-Science Activism

Anti-GMO activism is funded to a large extent by the [organic food industry](#) [15], which sees biotechnology as a threat to its profitability. Nonetheless, a sizable portion of the donations collected by anti-crop biotech groups comes from foundations that otherwise fund mainstream scientific research and education.

The Packard Foundation, for instance, has contributed to a variety of science-based organizations, [noting on its website that it](#) [16] “supports creative, timely research to spark fresh thinking and produce effective, innovative solutions.” However, the foundation also gave the [Natural Resources Defense Council](#) [17] (NRDC) \$1,250,000 between 2012 and 2016.

NRDC hasn't been shy about opposing the [scientific consensus](#) [18] on GMOs, reciting the familiar talking point that biotech companies “[have a stranglehold](#) [17]” on the federal agencies that should be regulating them. The environmental group has also worked with [journalist Paul Thacker](#) [17], who refers to pro-science groups, including the Genetic Literacy Project and ACSH, as [Monsanto's “spies](#) [19]” for educating the public about GMOs.

For many foundations, this tracker should spark some reflection and reconsideration of its funding practices, as the [GLP notes](#) [14]:

Even some of the most aggressive anti-GMO groups devoted solely to attacking biotechnology have received sizable grants from otherwise pro-science foundations

... Are these foundations aware that they are funding activist groups that rely on scientifically unsound research and reject the overwhelming scientific consensus that GMO technology is safe?

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Links

- [1] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Money#/media/File:Pengar_-_2019.jpg
- [2] <https://geneticliteracyproject.org/2020/05/05/anti-gmo-advocacy-funding-tracker-vast-network-of-donors-and-ngos-seed-doubt-about-crop-biotechnology/>
- [3] [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Erin_Brockovich_\(film\)#Reception](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Erin_Brockovich_(film)#Reception)
- [4] <https://anti-gmo-advocacy-funding-tracker.geneticliteracyproject.org/>
- [5] <https://anti-gmo-advocacy-funding-tracker.geneticliteracyproject.org/all-donors-recipients/#list>
- [6] <https://anti-gmo-advocacy-funding-tracker.geneticliteracyproject.org/all-donors-recipients/>
- [7] <https://anti-gmo-advocacy-funding-tracker.geneticliteracyproject.org/profiles/>
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- [9] <https://anti-gmo-advocacy-funding-tracker.geneticliteracyproject.org/u-s-right-to-know/>
- [10] <https://usrtk.org/the-agricultural-industrys-key-front-groups-and-shills-arent-trustworthy/>
- [11] <https://anti-gmo-advocacy-funding-tracker.geneticliteracyproject.org/environmental-working-group/>
- [12] <https://usrtk.org/the-agricultural-companies-have-a-potent-sleazy-political-machine>
- [13] <https://gmo.geneticliteracyproject.org/FAQ/gmo-foods-substantially-equivalent-non-gmo-foods-fda-maintains/>
- [14] <https://anti-gmo-advocacy-funding-tracker.geneticliteracyproject.org/narratives/>
- [15] <https://geneticliteracyproject.org/2019/10/21/viewpoint-documentary-modified-peddles-falsehoods-about-gmos-pesticides-and-corporate-control-of-food/>
- [16] <https://www.packard.org/what-we-fund/science/>
- [17] <https://anti-gmo-advocacy-funding-tracker.geneticliteracyproject.org/natural-resources-defense-council/>
- [18] <https://geneticliteracyproject.org/2017/06/19/gmo-20-year-safety-endorsement-280-science-institutions-more-3000-studies/>
- [19] https://www.huffpost.com/entry/monsantos-spies_n_5d7ba20de4b03b5fc88233c4