

# Standing up for transparency

## To the Editor:

I am writing to you as co-director of the consumer group US Right to Know (USRTK). Your editorial in the October issue entitled “Standing up for science” contained many indefensible statements. It falsely accused us of a “smear campaign” in investigating the food and agrichemical industries, their public relations firms and front groups, and the professors who speak for them.

Our aim is to expose the ties between the food and agrichemical industries and those who assist in their public relations efforts. The documents we obtained show that University of Florida Professor Kevin Folta accepted a \$25,000 unrestricted grant from Monsanto (St. Louis). In accepting the grant, he promised Monsanto “a solid return on the investment.” Just a couple weeks later, he publicly claimed no association with Monsanto, and repeatedly denied ties to Monsanto. Although the grant was paid to the University of Florida Foundation, Monsanto’s grant letter is addressed to Folta and specifically states that the funds could be used “at your discretion in support of your research and outreach projects.” The documents show that Folta’s proposal to Monsanto was crafted to evade disclosure and conflict-of-interest reporting. As Folta notes in his proposal, the purpose was “to eliminate the potential concern of the funding organization influencing the messaging,” by placing the funds into an account that is “not publicly noted.”

Just because it is legal to lie and hide corporate contributions doesn’t make it ethical. At one point, Folta even wrote to a Monsanto executive, “I’m glad to sign on to whatever you like, or write whatever you like.” This is not a shining example of integrity in science.

Your editorial neglects to mention that Folta used text that was ghostwritten by the public relations firm Ketchum (New York) for the website GMO Answers (<https://gmoanswers.com/>), and—incredibly—in a recent interview he defended this as an acceptable practice for scientists (<http://www.buzzfeed.com/brookeborel/when-scientists-email-monsanto>).

For the record, USRTK is not an anti-GMO group. We are a consumer group. We believe genetic engineering of crops may someday have benefits; however, it should proceed only with full transparency, as well as stringent health and environmental testing and safeguards.

We are working for transparency, accountability, the integrity of science and public institutions, and to improve our nation’s food system. We are not out to ‘get anyone.’ Folta’s main complaint is that his e-mails were cherry-picked; however, unlike WikiLeaks, we chose not to post thousands of pages of documents obtained through the US Freedom of Information Act exactly because they contain personal e-mails and other material that are not relevant to our investigation. We do release to journalists, or in some cases directly to the public, specific newsworthy documents about food and agrichemical industry PR and lobbying tactics that highlight what they do not want consumers to know about our food.

But a larger issue looms beyond the specifics of Folta’s relationship with Monsanto; the incident highlights a wider problem in the systems we have for assuring transparency concerning disclosure of financial interests of academic scientists. Although drug and medical device manufacturers are required under the Physician Payments Sunshine Act to disclose payments to doctors and teaching hospitals,

at this time, there is no similar requirement for food or agrichemical companies. USRTK believes there should be.

Collaboration between industry and academia can be beneficial as well as problematic; transparency must be the guiding principle for such relationships. Scientific journals, such as *Nature Biotechnology*, have an important role to play in advocating for transparency in funding, lobbying and public relations conducted by university scientists. We hope to hear more from your team on that topic.

We want to encourage scientists to communicate with the public to create a thriving science-based society. The problem comes when such communication is reduced to misleading PR talking points to promote commercial products and corporate profits.

## COMPETING FINANCIAL INTERESTS

The author declares competing financial interests: details are available in the online version of the paper ([doi:10.1038/nbt.3453](https://doi.org/10.1038/nbt.3453)).

*Stacy Malkan*

*US Right to Know, Oakland, California, USA.  
e-mail: [stacydmalkan@gmail.com](mailto:stacydmalkan@gmail.com)*

# Standing up for scientific consensus

## To the Editor:

As senior vice president for agriculture and natural resources at the University of Florida in Gainesville, where Professor Kevin Folta is based, I am responding to the letter from activist group US Right to Know (USRTK). USRTK presents its account of Folta’s relationship with private companies. Folta already has done much soul-searching, acknowledged in retrospect where he would do things differently, and set a new standard for disclosure by posting online the sources of his outreach funding.

Although USRTK aims, as stated in its letter, “to improve our nation’s food system,” in reality its actions have diverted us at the University of Florida from doing so. Folta already has spent a great deal of time responding to USRTK. I believe he can better spend his time on research to actually improve a food system instead of continuing to debate which people and institutions are the most trustworthy to do so. This is why I, and not Folta, am responding

to USRTK’s letter. In my opinion, both general circulation and scientific media have erroneously framed the interactions of scientists and USRTK as a scientific debate. It is not.

A broad scientific consensus exists that genetically modified (GM) foods are as safe to eat as conventionally produced food. That we continue to see this consensus rejected or have activists muddle public understanding of this is frustrating. However, food scientists take consolation in knowing that those who champion the science of climate change, sea-level rise or vaccines face similar challenges.

The last time I responded to USRTK’s accusations, my response was followed by the group filing a public records request against me. That request has led to publicly funded attorneys pouring through thousands of my own e-mails. So be it.

I am proud of the transparency in which scientists test their ideas. We embrace transparency in the form of peer review. We put our colleagues on notice that we intend

to publish, and we invite their criticism. I can think of no other institution—including activist groups—that adheres to such an exacting standard.

With regard to USRTK's specific accusation that Folta used text on the GMO Answers website that was "ghostwritten" by the Ketchum public relations firm, USRTK continues to overstate the issue. The facts are that when first contacted to write for the site, Folta was provided by Ketchum with sample answers meant as a guide for answering the first questions on the public website. As these answers were scientifically correct, Folta elected to post versions of them he had edited. In Folta's review of the 67 answers that he provided to GMO Answers, he found only two cases where he amended Ketchum samples in this manner. The rest were Folta's original work. Folta did all of this work on his own time (and continues to do so), and in these two cases, he used a well-researched and accurate statement as a starting point. Folta adjusted, rewrote and changed text to make it his own.

It is my hope that once the University of Florida has produced the sought-after records, the university's Institute of Food

and Agricultural Sciences, which I lead, can return its full attention to developing efficient, sustainable and environmentally sensitive agriculture.

We are in a race against time to bring science to the rescue of Florida's iconic citrus industry, to stave off pests and disease, and to feed the hungry. Producing e-mails to feed the narrative of an activist group and debating what those emails say slows us all down in that race.

#### COMPETING FINANCIAL INTERESTS

The author declares no competing financial interests

*Jack M Payne*

*University of Florida, Gainesville, Florida, USA  
e-mail: jackpayne@ufl.edu*

#### **Nature Biotechnology replies:**

This journal is in favor of transparency concerning disclosure of financial interests of researchers. In terms of federally mandated disclosure, since 2012, the Physician Payments Sunshine Act has required academic investigators to report travel and expenses reimbursed by a for-profit entity that is not part of a sponsored grant or contract. This applies to any

researcher receiving funding from the US National Institutes of Health. Plant researchers, such as Kevin Folta, working outside of the US Public Health Service, do not fall under those rules. The question is, do the harms arising from ties between agrochemical companies and academic researchers warrant the additional burden, expense and inconvenience of implementing reimbursement tracking systems in every institution, as USRTK would like to see mandated by federal law? In the case of pharmaceuticals, the link between industry ties, bias of the literature and exposure of patients to unnecessary harms was clear. Can the same be said of the ties between agricultural researchers and companies? On the other hand, as mentioned in our Editorial, in the GM 'debate', Monsanto (St. Louis) and the rest of industry has already "been blamed for everything from farmer suicides to lacing milk with growth hormone and pesticides." Perhaps the implementation of a system of transparency concerning industry interactions at institutions undertaking agricultural research would go some way to restoring public trust in scientists working with the seed and agrochemical industry.