

WTO GM trade war

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Long before the US formally complained to the WTO, We began to hear rumours of biotech lobbyists in the US putting increasing pressure on the US Government and House of Reps to “do something” about the EU precautionary approach to GM food and farming. They found their inability to tap into lucrative markets here in the UK bothersome, but they also saw resistance to GM growing – from supermarkets pledging not to use GM in their products to public campaigns organising around the issue.

We felt that it was almost inevitable that a formal dispute would indeed be launched. After all, there is a huge overlap between the Bush administration and the biotech industry – around a dozen people, from Bush to Donald Rumsfeld to the head of the Agriculture Department have all received money or preciously worked for Monsanto.

We agreed that we needed to prepare as much as possible for a dispute in order to be ready if and when it came.

In May 2003 I researched and wrote a document called “GM Trade War Looms”, which gives an overview the highly secretive WTO process works and how it dealt with similar issues in the past in the Beef Hormone case and the EU banana case. This highlighted how we anticipated the dispute might run
We then turned to discussing how we would raise a public protest to the US using the WTO to tell Europe what to eat.

Friends of the Earth is the world’s largest grass roots environmental organisation, working in a bottom up process of discussion and consensus building. This means we are a highly diverse group of people with widely differing views on how to get things done.

When the GM trade war presented itself, it soon became clear that two contradictory views had formed about how to respond:

- One group of people wanted to submit a formal amicus curiae brief
- The other group felt that engaging with the dispute resolution mechanism in this way helped legitimise the WTO processes in a most unhelpful way.

We spend some time trying to reconcile these two approaches, but this proved impossible.

In the end we decided to make our point by turning the process on its head – since we believe everyone who eats and lives on Earth has a stake in the WTO case, we agreed that everyone ought to submit their own “friend of the court” brief.

This was when the Citizens’ Objection was born.

We gathered together a coalition of NGOs. We set up an international steering group to organise and coordinate the international public work, as well as to devise the means to deliver the Objections with as much impact as possible. This was a major effort coordinating the work of both GM and trade campaigners in a way and on a scale that had not been attempted previously.

The Bite Back campaign was launched during the Cancun Ministerial on 11 September 2004 (the day the Biosafety Protocol came into force). Between September and May we collected over 109,000 Objections from 96 countries.

Over the course of 8 months we also coordinated an international delivery of those Objections to the direct to the WTO during their annual Open Day in Early June. We brought a number of activists to Geneva, dressed them in coveralls and gas masks, and declared the WTO headquarters a biohazard while piling up the boxes of objections on their lawn. Needless to say, we got their attention.

The Bite Back campaign will now continue by moving on to bring the campaign issues to the attention of national level politicians. We invite all of you to come to our strategy workshop this evening to help discussion how we do that.