

Is the US government cultivating a conflict of interest?

Par

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The US Department of Agriculture (USDA) has just appointed an executive of the biotechnology company Pairwise. The company will market its first genetically modified food in 2023. Evident conflict of interest or administrative routine?

In November 2022, the USDA appointed Haven Baker, business manager and co-founder of Pairwise [\[1\]](#), to its *Fruit and Vegetable Industry Advisory Committee* (FVIAC, see box below) [\[2\]](#) [\[3\]](#). The USDA is one of the departments (ministries) in charge of the “GMO” dossier which decides, among other things, whether a GMO is subject to regulation or not. The current FVIAC has 25 members, three of whom produce and/or market GMOs. Nathan Pumplin is the president of Norfolk Healthy Produce, which, like Pairwise, develops products derived from genetic modification

techniques, including the purple tomato recently approved for marketing in the US [4]. A third FVIAC member, Amy Baker, is quality and regulatory affairs manager for Peterson Farms, which produces some GMOs, such as corn.

Not all FVIAC members with a “*biotech*” profile have an interest in making a short-term return on significant research investments, and thus seeing GMO products enter the US market quickly. Pairwise, a company historically and structurally linked to Monsanto (Bayer) [5]. The company, which has a management team that includes three ex-Monsanto executives: Tom Adams, Mike Mann and Dan Jenkins, is now in a key phase of its development as it launches a range of genetically modified products under the label “*Conscious Foods*” in 2023 (accessed on 25 January 2023). The mission is clear: “*build a healthier world through better fruits and vegetables using CRISPR and gene editing to grow new, nutritious and tasty varieties*” [6]

In the United States, GMOs have made their way to the plate in various forms. Regarding GM soybean, while the vast majority is intended for livestock, oils and lecithins are authorised for human consumption. Other examples include Aquadvantage™ salmon, which was released in 2015 (but which is not widely produced), potatoes, apples (in what appear to be small volumes) and Norfolk Healthy Produce’s antioxidant-rich purple tomato. It is unclear at present whether the new genetic modification techniques will lead to more and more products being marketed in the US. However, the US market remains ‘juicy’ and Pairwise is pleased with this: “*The US Department of Agriculture is responsible for promoting and protecting America’s \$1 trillion food supply. It also provides research and development programmes to improve the quality and safety of our food*”.

The North Carolina-based company is very well positioned in this race as it holds exclusive patent rights to Crispr/Cas9 technology in the food and agricultural fields [7]. The fact that one of its executives is on the FVIAC committee, whose decisions affect the authorisation and status of GMOs, is a major additional asset for Pairwise.

What appears to be a common situation at the USDA - it has many committees with industry members [8] - is not free of conflict of interest. We have contacted the federal agency for clarification on this issue. We have not yet received a response.

[What is the “Food and Vegetable Industry Advisory Committee” \(FVIAC\)?](#)

The FVIAC advises the US Secretary of Agriculture on issues affecting the fruit and vegetable industry “*including how programs can be adapted to meet the changing needs of the US fruit and vegetable industry*”. This committee includes a variety of food chain stakeholders, including “*organic and non-organic growers, [...] industry trade associations, [...] food service providers [...]*” at different territorial levels. USDA’s Agricultural Marketing Service (AMS) ensures that such committees “*reflect the diversity of their industries in terms of member experience, production and distribution methods, marketing strategies and other distinguishing factors*”.

[1] Pairwise, “[About us](#)” (accessed 25 January 2023).

[2] Pairwise, “[CBO Haven Baker Appointed to USDA Fruit and Vegetable Industry Advisory Committee](#)”, 3 November 2022 (accessed 25 January 2023)

[3] USDA, "[USDA Appoints Members to Fruit and Vegetable Industry Advisory Committee](#)", 2 November 2022 (accessed 25 January 2023).

[4] [Christophe NOISETTE](#), « États-Unis - Une tomate transgénique bientôt autorisée », *Inf'OGM*, 31 October 2022.

[5] Sonja Begemann, "[Monsanto Invests a Total of \\$125 Million In Pairwise for Gene Editing](#)", *The Daily scoop*, 18 March 2018 (accessed 25 January 2023).

[6] Pairwise, "[Introducing Conscious™ Foods](#)", 24 March 2022 (accessed 25 January 2023).

[7] Pairwise, "[Pairwise Licenses CRISPR Technologies from Massachusetts General Hospital and Broad Institute](#)", March 18, 2019 (accessed January 25, 2023).

[8] USDA, "[USDA Advisory Committees](#)".

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