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Dear Take the Flour Back,

We have learned that you are planning to attack our research test site on 27th May. Please read the following in the spirit of openness and dialogue – we know we cannot stop you from taking the action you plan, nor would we wish to see force used against you. Therefore we can only appeal to your consciences, and ask you to reconsider before it is too late, and before years of work to which we have devoted our lives are destroyed forever.

We appeal to you as environmentalists. We agree that agriculture should seek to work “with nature rather than against it” (to quote from our website), and that motivation underlies our work. We have developed a variety of wheat which does not need to be sprayed with insecticides. Instead, we have identified a way of getting the plant to repel aphids, using a natural process that has evolved in mint and many other plants – and simply adding this into the wheat genome to enable it to do the same thing.

So our GM wheat could, for future generations, substantially reduce the use of agricultural chemicals. Are you really against this? Or are you simply against it because it is “GMO” and you therefore think it is unnatural in some way? Remember – all plants in all types of agriculture are genetically modified to serve humanity’s needs, and the (E)- $\beta$ -farnesene compound our wheat produces is already found in over 400 species of plant, many of which are consumed as food and drink on a daily basis (including the hops used in beer, to give just one example). To suggest that we have used a ‘cow gene’ and that our wheat is somehow part-cow betrays a misunderstanding which may serve to confuse people or scare them but has no basis in scientific reality.

You seem to think, even before we have had a chance to test it, that our new wheat variety is bad. How do you know this? Clearly it is not through scientific enquiry, as the tests have not yet been performed. You state on your website: “There is serious doubt that the aphid alarm pheromone as found in this GM crop would even work.” You could be right – but if you destroy our test, you and we will never know. Is that what you want? Our research is trying to shed light on questions about the safety and the usefulness of new varieties of the staple food crops on which all of us depend. As activists you might prefer never to know whether our new wheat variety would work, but we believe you are in a minority – in a democratic society most people do value factual knowledge and understand that it is necessary for sensible decision making.

You have described genetically modified crops as “not properly tested”. Yet when tests are carried out you are planning to destroy them before any useful information can be obtained. We do not see how preventing the acquisition of knowledge is a defensible position in an age of reason – what you are planning to do is reminiscent of clearing books from a library because you wish to stop other people finding out what they contain. We remind you that such actions do not have a proud tradition.

Our work is publically funded, we have pledged that our results will not be patented and will not be owned by any private company - if our wheat proves to be beneficial we want it to be available to farmers around the world at minimum cost. If you destroy publicly funded research, you leave us in a situation where only the big corporations can afford the drastic security precautions needed to continue biotechnology research - and you therefore further promote a situation you say you are trying to avoid.

We end with a further concern. You may not know much about Rothamsted. You may not know that our institute is the site of perhaps the longest-running environmental experiment in the world, with plots testing different agricultural methods and their ecological consequences dating all the way back to 1843. Some of these plots are very close to the GM wheat test site, and we are extremely worried that anyone walking onto them would endanger a research programme that has been in operation for almost two centuries.

But we also see our newest tests as part of this unbroken line – research never ends, and technology never can nor should be frozen in time (as implied by the term ‘GM freeze’). Society didn’t stop with the horse-drawn plough because of fears that the tractor was ‘unnatural’. We didn’t refuse to develop better wheat varieties in the past – which keep us well-fed today – simply because they were different from what went before and therefore scary. The wheat that we consume today has had many genetic changes made to it – to make plants produce more grain, resist disease, avoid growing too tall and blow over in the wind, be suitable for different uses like pasta and bread, provide more nutrition and grow at the right time for farming seasons. These agricultural developments make it possible for the same amount of food to be produced from a smaller area of land, meaning less necessity for farmers to convert wildlands to agriculture, surely we should work together in this?

When you visit us on 27 May we will be available to meet and talk to you. We would welcome the chance to show you our work and explain why we think it could benefit the environment in the future. But we must ask you to respect the need to gather knowledge unimpeded. Please do not come to damage and destroy.

**As scientists we know only too well that we do not have all the answers. That is why we need to conduct experiments. And that is why you in turn must not destroy them.**

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'J. A. Pickett', written over a horizontal line.

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Lesley Smart (Field Entomology)

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