

Part I: The Messengers

“Doubt is our product,” wrote executives for tobacco giant Brown & Williamson in a famous 1969 memo on communications strategy. “It is the best means of competing with the ‘body of fact’ that exists in the mind of the general public. It is also the best means of establishing controversy.”¹¹ This core insight became the linchpin for a range of tobacco industry tactics in the ensuing decades, from funding fake science to paying experts to denounce public health findings about the harms of smoking. Today, the food and agrochemical industries have used similar tactics from the tobacco industry’s playbook to sow doubt about the scientifically proven benefits of organic agriculture and the harms of pesticide and antibiotic use on factory farms; for instance, funding a vast array of organizations — from trade associations to front groups — in order to do so.

To convey the scale of Big Food’s public relations efforts, we analyzed the spending and marketing programs of some of the largest trade associations and front groups of the food, biotech and agrochemical industries. We found that four of the largest food and chemical industry trade associations — the Grocery Manufacturers Association, the Biotechnology Industry Organization,¹² American Meat Institute¹³ and CropLife America¹⁴— together spent over half a billion dollars promoting their industries from 2009 to 2013. (See Annex 3). While these funds were neither solely directed to communications work nor focused exclusively on food, farming or agricultural issues, these expenses included significant contributions to communications and public relations efforts on these topics.¹⁵

Unprecedented amounts of money have also been spent in recent years in response to grassroots efforts to label genetically engineered foods. From 2012 to 2014, food and chemical companies spent more than \$103 million on public relations campaigns to defeat GMO labeling initiatives in four states.¹⁶ Industrial beef, corn, soybeans and dairy interests have also spent tens of millions each in the past five years on communications to promote chemical-intensive agriculture through commodity research and promotion programs — known as check-off programs.¹⁷ Additionally, food



The food industry uses many of the same PR tactics perfected by the tobacco industry to sell their harmful products.

Photo source: Stanford School of Medicine, Stanford Research into the Impact of Tobacco Advertising

and agriculture companies spend millions every year on product or company-specific marketing that also benefits the sector as a whole. Monsanto, for example, spent \$95 million, \$87 million and \$100 million on marketing in 2013, 2012 and 2011 respectively, advertising that went beyond promotion of Monsanto products to benefit trade associations, front groups and the promotion of agricultural biotechnology generally.¹⁸

While trade groups have historically focused on lobbying directed at regulators and elected officials, in recent years many of them have stepped up their PR efforts, “putting far more money into advertising and public relations than lobbying” according to an analysis by Center for Public Integrity.¹⁹ Some of these funds went to industry front groups, described below and in Annex 4. Our research found that 14 of the most significant food and agriculture front groups spent roughly \$126 million from 2009 to 2013 on a range of tactics designed to shape what the public and policymakers think about food, health and sustainability, often without disclosing the true source of those funds.²⁰ Seven of these groups were founded just since 2009 (See Annex 4).

Top 11 Food and Agriculture Industry Front Groups

Front Group	Spending 2009-2013*	Leading Corporate Board Members or Donors†	Issue Focus‡	Year Founded
U.S. Farmers and Ranchers Alliance	\$28,677,666	Monsanto, Dow Chemical, DuPont	Defends GMOs, pesticides, routine antibiotic use in livestock	2010
International Food Information Council	\$24,167,350	Coca-Cola, Pfizer Animal Health, Kraft Foods, The Hershey Company	Defends GMOs, processed foods, BPA, sugar, additives, routine antibiotic use in livestock	1985
Center for Food Integrity	\$20,988,003	Monsanto, National Restaurant Assn., United Soybean Board	Defends pesticides, routine antibiotics use in livestock, GMOs	2007
Council for Biotechnology information	\$16,729,325	Monsanto, BASF, Dow, Bayer, DuPont, Syngenta	Promotes safety and necessity of GMOs	2000
Center for Consumer Freedom	\$ 15,880,295	Coca Cola, Tyson Foods, Arby's, Hooters	Attacks minimum wage, Humane Society, organics, sugar-sweetened beverage regulation	1996
American Council on Science and Health§	\$9,107,245	Chevron, Coca-Cola, McDonald's	Defends soda, BPA, GMOs, processed foods, attacks organics	1978
Global Harvest Initiative	\$4,904,123	Monsanto, Elanco, DuPont, IBM, John Deere	Promotes GMOs as solution to feeding the world	2009
Animal Agriculture Alliance	\$2,686,713	National Pork Board, Bayer, Elanco, American Feed Industry Assn.	Defends routine use of antibiotic in livestock and other industrial livestock practices	1987
Protect the Harvest	\$1,371,941	Lucas Oil and Lucas Cattle Company	Attacks the Humane Society, defends industrial farming practices	2011
Alliance for Food and Farming	\$1,205,218	California Farm Bureau Federation, Western Growers, Produce Marketing Association	Defends pesticides, disparages organics	1989
Coalition for Safe and Affordable Food	N/A**	Grocery Manufacturers Association, Biotechnology Industry Organization, CropLife America	Fights GMO labeling, attacks organics	2014

* Based on 2009-2013 IRS Form 990s

† Based on 2013 IRS Form 990s or organizational websites. Corporations listed are either members, donors or their executives serve on the boards of these organizations.

‡ Based on 2013 IRS Form 990s or organizational websites

§ 2013 data not available at time of publication. 2013 figure is an average of previously available expenses.

** Founded too recently to have reported expenditures

Front Groups

In 1913, Austrian-American Edward Bernays, credited as the father of modern-day public relations, hired a team of doctors to promote the benefits of bacon for breakfast. Bernays did not disclose that the doctors he hired were paid by the pork industry. A few years later, Bernays launched the Celiac Project, touting the benefits of bananas for celiac sufferers — without revealing that its sole funder was the United Fruit Company, the biggest banana producer and importer in the country.²¹ Thus was born what has become the public relations tactic known as front groups, or the third-party technique: creating an organization perceived as working in the public interest, but that really benefits a company or industry.

Through running media campaigns, providing friendly and accessible spokespeople to the media, producing reports and even supplying curricula to public schools, front groups have proven to be an effective strategy in shaping public opinion and fighting unfavorable policy.

By avoiding mention of or only selectively disclosing funding sources, these groups obfuscate their real agenda. As public-interest lawyer and author Michele Simon writes in *The Best Public Relations Money Can Buy*, “front groups often have deceptive-sounding names and attempt to create a positive public impression that hides their funders’ economic motives.”²² Through running media campaigns, providing friendly and accessible spokespeople to the media, producing reports and even supplying curricula to public schools, front groups have proven to be an effective strategy in shaping public opinion and fighting unfavorable policy.

Front Groups: A Closer Look

In the following section, we highlight several prominent food industry front groups that are often quoted in the media with no mention of their industry connections. For detail about these and

others, see Annex 1. Keep in mind this is just a selection of existing food and agriculture-related front groups.

U.S. Farmers and Ranchers Alliance

Mission: “to enhance U.S. consumer trust in modern food production to ensure the abundance of affordable, safe food”

Founded: 2011

Expenses (2013): \$10,213,470

In September 2010, the trade publication *Agri-Pulse* reported on internal discussions of a cross-section of food industry trade groups and companies on the development of a major new agricultural image campaign in response to growing public concerns over the food system.²³ As *Agri-Pulse* put it, the campaign would help:

reverse consumers’ negative perceptions about a broad range of issues including so-called ‘factory farming,’ the use of agricultural chemicals, livestock management practices, processed ‘industrial food,’ and high-fructose corn syrup (HFCS).²⁴

The industry publication also noted that this image campaign was being created as a preemptive strike against anticipated regulation, from potentially tighter rules on pesticides to a ban on routine use of antibiotics in animal agriculture.²⁵

Brought together by this shared interest in unified messaging, a number of the country’s biggest chemical, animal pharmaceutical, biotech and agribusiness companies launched the U.S. Farmers and Ranchers Alliance in 2010. A representative from Ketchum, one of its PR firms, described the new group this way: “People see *Food, Inc.* and think everything in that movie is accurate,” but USFRA wants to ‘clear the air’ and ‘get a national dialogue, a conversation, going.’²⁶

Today, USFRA’s paying members include chemical and agricultural biotech and chemical companies such as DuPont, BASF, Dow, Syngenta and Monsanto; trade groups like CropLife America; and animal pharmaceutical companies such as Elanco Animal Health, Merck Animal Health and Zoetis. Since 2011, USFRA has spent more than \$29 million, roughly \$10 million a year, position-



Source: USFRA Antibiotics Messaging and Antibiotics Working Group - Linda Eatherton, Partner/Director, Global, Food & Nutrition Practice, Ketchum, from the 2014 NIAA Annual Conference titled 'The Precautionary Principle: How Agriculture Will Thrive', March 31 - April 2, 2014, Omaha, NE, USA.

ing itself as a voice for all of the country's farmers and ranchers.²⁷ But there is not one organic or sustainable industry group among its members. Meanwhile, its policy platform defends GMOs, the routine use of antibiotics in animal agriculture, and the safety of synthetic pesticides, and its programs have sought to boost consumer confidence in industrial agriculture and the practices and products of its funders.

Front groups like USFRA often create working groups of like-minded members to promote particular issues through aggressive lobbying and common messaging. To address the growing public concerns about routine antibiotics use on factory farms, for instance, USFRA created the Antibiotics Working Group to develop educational materials and train spokespeople to downplay the risks of routine antibiotics. Its messages contradict well-documented evidence of the widespread misuse of routine antibiotics and the alarming connection between this overuse and antibiotic-resistant bacteria.²⁸

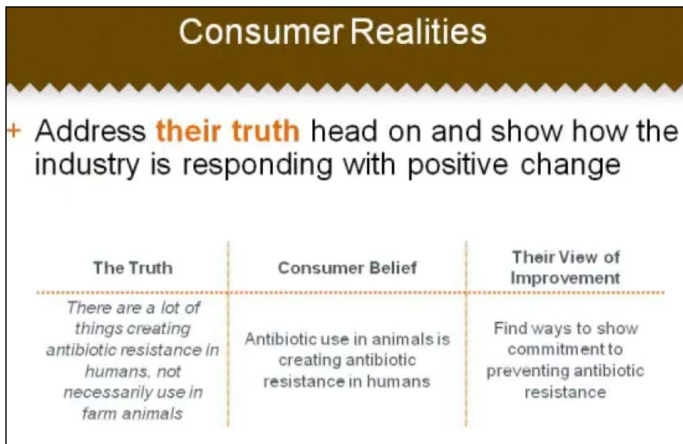
Members of this working group have attended editorial board meetings, held media briefings in New York and Washington, D.C., and written op-eds.²⁹ They have also helped craft and place letters-to-the-editor and developed online content, including antibiotics-related infographics, blog posts and message maps, along with answers to Frequently Asked Questions on the USFRA web-

site, FoodDialogues.com.³⁰ In much of the resulting press coverage, including a piece in the *Wall Street Journal* that USFRA documents in its annual report, there is no disclosure of its ties to the industry that benefits from antibiotic use.³¹

USFRA also has a private online community forum of 300 Consumer Food Connectors, including chefs, dietitians, farmers, researchers, nurses, educators and marketers who are used as a "springboard for testing new content and ideas surrounding USFRA programming."³² In its annual report, USFRA noted that this group helped to show that exposure to messages from the alliance made consumers more likely to feel like the "U.S. is heading in the right direction in the way farmers and ranchers grow and raise our food."³³

One of USFRA's cornerstone activities is its Food Dialogues, hosted around the country and live-streamed online. Although these "dialogues" are billed as fair and balanced and boast moderators from mainstream media like CNN, the panels are constructed to serve USFRA's messaging goals. Take the "dialogue" on antibiotics. While the five-person panel included Jean Halloran from the Consumers Union, one of the nation's most vocal critics of antibiotics overuse in animal agriculture, the other participants unilaterally downplayed, and even denied, the connection between routine antibiotics use and the crisis of antibiotic resistance — even though this connection has long been accepted as fact.³⁴ The USFRA touted Halloran's participation as evidence of balance, but the other views presented, which were not backed up by evidence, created the perception that livestock producers do not use antibiotics routinely or, worse, that the majority of panelists are right and there is no reason to be worried about antibiotic resistance.³⁵

USFRA also mobilizes farmers as spokespeople through its EASE ("Engage, Acknowledge, Share and Earn Trust") trainings. Through the training program, participants learn how to engage with consumers, using USFRA talking points and research on consumer attitudes.³⁶ From 2011 to late 2013, the USFRA reports that it trained more than 8,500 farmers and ranchers in 22 states.³⁷



Source: USFRA Antibiotics Messaging and Antibiotics Working Group

Every year, the USFRA also selects farmer representatives to play a high-visibility role through media interviews, advertisements and public appearances.³⁸ For these one-year terms, farmers are given a \$15,000 stipend and professional media and speaker training.

Some of these USFRA trained farmers were trained to echo the antibiotic-use-is-no-problem frame, writing in the *Minneapolis Star Tribune*, “Despite what you might have heard, we treat our animals with antibiotics only when they are sick, and then at the recommendation of a veterinarian.”³⁹ One USFRA-trained hog farmer, wrote an op-ed for CNN’s *Eatocracy* explaining, “Antibiotics are just one of the tools we have in our toolbox; we don’t rely on them as part of our daily care plan.”⁴⁰

Center for Consumer Freedom

Mission: “devoted to promoting personal responsibility and protecting consumer choices”

Founded: 1996

Expenses (2013): \$1.3 million

Richard Berman, founder of the Center for Consumer Freedom, has been called “the king of corporate front groups and propaganda.”⁴¹ Over the years, Berman’s organization has received millions of dollars from the restaurant, alcohol, tobacco and food industries to fight common-sense laws in the public interest. The group’s board includes executives with ties to major restaurant chains, like Ruby Tuesday and Denny’s, as well as

the former president of public affairs for Wal-Mart and the government relations director for Darden Restaurants.⁴²

Registered as a 501(c)(3) as Center for Organizational Research and Education, the Center for Consumer Freedom has fought the New York City Department of Public Health ban on sales of sugary drinks larger than sixteen ounces. It has battled Mothers Against Drunk Driving on behalf of the alcohol industry. And it has taken on the Humane Society of the United States over its policy initiatives on factory farming. A secret recording of Berman speaking to oil and gas executives published by *The New York Times* reveals Berman’s tactics and thinking: “You can either win ugly or lose pretty.”⁴³ Berman further explains that companies must be willing to “exploit emotions like fear, greed and anger” to turn them against environmental groups.⁴⁴

In 2010, the Center for Consumer Freedom ratcheted up its campaign against the Humane Society, spending nearly \$1 million on *HumaneWatch.org*, which it calls “a watchdog effort to educate the public about the Humane Society.” Berman’s organization has continued to target the Humane Society ever since, including running an attack ad during the 2012 Academy Awards.⁴⁵ Berman claims the Humane Society spends only a fraction of its budget on direct service to animals, with the rest going to ballot initiatives and lobbying. Indeed, the Humane Society’s successful work pushing for legislation to improve the conditions for factory farm animals is likely what has CCF’s anonymous funders concerned.⁴⁶ As Humane Society Director Wayne Pacelle told *Mother Jones*: “They’d love it if we put all our money exclusively into rescuing animals on the street and didn’t get to the source of the problem.”⁴⁷

In 2012, the Humane Society filed a legal complaint, alleging that Berman illegally used nonprofit legal structures for the benefit of his corporate clients.⁴⁸ The lawsuit pointed to IRS filings that showed that the majority of Center for Consumer Freedom’s income went directly to Berman’s for-profit PR firm.⁴⁹ The Center’s 2011 Form 990 shows it paid 61 percent of that year’s budget, or \$1.29 million, to Richard Berman and Company, Inc., for

management, advertising, research and accounting fees.⁵⁰ Confirming Humane Society's criticism of this spending, Charity Navigator wrote: "We find the practice of a charity contracting for management services with a business owned by that charity's CEO atypical as compared to how other charities operate and have therefore issued [a] Donor Advisory."⁵¹

Center for Food Integrity

Mission: "to build consumer trust and confidence in the contemporary U.S. food system by sharing accurate, balanced information, correcting misinformation, modeling best practices and engaging stakeholders to address issues that are important to consumers"

Founded: 2007

Expenses (2013): \$5,711,445

The Center for Food Integrity is directed by a board that includes representatives from the National Restaurant Association, American Farm Bureau Federation, the National Pork Board and companies including Tyson Foods and Monsanto. Jason Clay of World Wildlife Fund is the lone non-profit 501(c)(3) group representative that sits on its board, according to the organization's website.

CFI develops polls and training sessions that help its members craft their messages to resonate with consumers and build consensus on the benefits of member companies' products and practices.⁵² CFI has an Issues Advisory Team to add industry-vetted information on the website *BestFoodFacts.org*, downplaying concerns about chemicals in food. CFI also touts relationships with more than 250 food- and health-focused influencers with webcasts and other events.⁵³

One of its initiatives is called "A New Conversation about Food." With a \$1.5 million budget, this program is described as initiating public engagement to connect with customers, influencers, policymakers and consumers.⁵⁴ For instance, when food bloggers called on Subway to stop using the additive azodicarbonamide in its bread, based on a precautionary approach to health concerns (the additive is banned for use in the EU), CFI developed an "Issues Advisory Team" to add information on its *BestFoodFacts.org* website, defending

the additive's safety.⁵⁵

CFI also develops webinars for its members on such topics as "Cracking the Code on Food Issues: Insights from Moms, Millennials and Foodies," sharing consumer polling research to help hone industry messaging. Other webinars include tips for communicating about issues like antibiotic resistance and genetically engineered foods in an effort to assuage consumer concerns about these food safety issues.⁵⁶



Source: Center for Food Integrity Webinar Presentation (2015): *Cracking the Code on Food Issues: Consumer Insights on Animal Agriculture presentation*

Alliance for Food and Farming

Mission: "a resource for science-based information on the safety of organic and conventional produce"

Founded: 1989

Expenses (2013): \$243,782

While the Alliance presents itself as a science-based resource on the safety of organic and conventional produce, its funding comes from trade groups for industrially grown apples, citrus, pears and grapes, among other industry groups.⁵⁷ The group's IRS filings make it clear their real purpose is to "promote food safety and the benefits of *agricultural chemicals* in ensuring safe, affordable food supply for consumers" [emphasis added].⁵⁸

With a relatively small budget, the Alliance has used various approaches to convince consumers, especially moms, that produce grown with agrochemicals is no less safe for people or the planet than organic produce.

Its strategy has been to target journalists with reports, surveys and webinars critiquing EWG's *Shopper's Guide to Pesticides in Produce* (see below caption) and make the case for the safety of pesticides.⁵⁹ As the Alliance says, its goal "is to generate more balanced media reporting and change public perception about the safety of produce when it comes to pesticide residues."⁶⁰ Despite increasing evidence of the impacts of even low-level exposure to harmful chemical pesticides, from the President's Panel on Cancer⁶¹ and peer-reviewed science, the Alliance's spin has focused on correcting what it calls a "misconception that some fresh produce items contain excessive amounts of pesticide residues."⁶²

Other Alliance messaging has focused on bringing organic consumers back to conventional food with marketing pieces like, "A Dozen Reasons Why Eating Both Conventional and Organic Produce is the Right Choice for You." The Alliance also published a report called "Pesticide Use Regulations on Organic Fruit and Vegetable Farms" that highlights the few, less-toxic, less persistent pesticides allowed by the National Organic Program, spuriously implying that there are few differences between organic and conventional food.⁶³



Since 2010, with an initial \$180,000 grant from the California Department of Food and Agriculture, the Alliance has focused primarily on trying to discredit the EWG's *Shopper's Guide to Pesticides in Produce*, also known as the "Dirty Dozen" list, a widely used tool to educate consumers. It has also targeted Pesticide Action Network's consumer resource guide, *WhatsOnMyFood.org*.

Council for Biotechnology Information

Mission: "communicates science-based information about the benefits and safety of agricultural biotechnology"

Founded: 2000

Expenses (2013): \$4,982,754



Image captured at GMOAnswers.com The Council on Biotechnology launched GMOAnswers.com in 2013 to "help clear up confusion and dispel mistrust" about genetic engineering.

With a nearly \$5 million budget in 2013 raised from its corporate members, the Council for Biotechnology Information focuses on promoting the benefits of GMOs and fighting labeling initiatives and other policies that would regulate genetically engineered foods. The Council's board includes representatives from DuPont, BASF Group, Bayer CropScience, Monsanto, Dow AgroSciences and Syngenta. Among other work, the Council creates policy briefs for regulators, funds media training sessions and conferences for students, farmers and academics on the "benefits of ag biotech,"⁶⁴ and partners with grower groups and academic institutions to enhance "acceptance of ag biotech."⁶⁵ In Canada, its programs include "training third-party spokespeople (farmers, academics, dieticians) to educate media and the public about risk and about the benefits of ag biotech."⁶⁶

According to its 2012 Form 990, the Council worked with its members to engage with consumers in addressing concerns about agricultural biotechnology, and conducted "outreach to environmental, anti-hunger, and corporate entities, as well as international officials to advance the understanding of agriculture biotechnology and the challenges related to unpredictable regulatory systems."⁶⁷ In practice, the Council works to discredit opponents of biotechnology and downplay the evidence of its risks, including growing weed resistance, increased chemical use and food safety concerns. It also funds other organizations that promote GMOs: In 2011 and 2012 the Council provided \$204,000 to the Hawaii Crop Improvement Association for "outreach, education, lobbying, and communication activities."⁶⁸

The Coalition for Safe and Affordable Food

Mission: provides “policy makers, media, consumers and all stakeholders with the facts about ingredients grown through GM technology” and “advocates for common-sense policy solutions that will only further enhance the safety of the GM crops and protect the vital role they play in today’s modern global food supply chain”

Founded: 2014

Expenses (2013): N/A



Source: Coalitionforsafeaffordablefood.org

The Coalition for Safe and Affordable Food was founded by the Grocery Manufacturers Association, the Biotechnology Industry Organization and CropLife America (the trade association for agrochemical producers), to respond to state GMO labeling initiatives and advance a federal voluntary GMO labeling bill that would preempt and prevent mandatory labeling at the local, state and federal levels.⁶⁹ To accomplish its policy objectives, the Coalition actively promotes its core pro-GMO messages via its website, aggressive press outreach, social media and other vehicles, stating on its website that GMOs help “provide Americans with a safe, abundant and affordable food supply,” that “GMOs are safe,” that they are “better for the environment” and use “less water” and “pesticides”⁷⁰ — despite numerous articles and studies challenging these assertions.⁷¹

Keep Food Affordable

Mission: “brings together consumers, farmers, and food security organizations to keep food safe, affordable, and available for all Americans”

Founded: 2012

Expenses (2013): N/A



A graphic posted on Keep Food Affordable’s facebook page on May 12, 2014 in order to sway consumers against country of origin labeling, an important labeling program that allows people to know where their food comes from.

While the Keep Food Affordable Coalition presents itself as a coalition of consumers, farmers and food security organizations, with a shared mission of promoting accessible, affordable food, it is actually funded by industry trade associations, including the National Pork Producers Council and the Egg Farmers of America. It was founded in response to animal welfare and food advocates’ attempts to pass legislation to improve factory farm conditions. The Coalition’s messaging aims to undermine such efforts by claiming that those regulations — including requirements to stop the abuse of antibiotics in livestock production — would cause food prices to skyrocket.⁷² Yet, evidence from a Consumers Union report shows that antibiotic-free meat prices were not necessarily higher in various supermarkets, and in fact were sometimes actually lower than the national average for meat raised with antibiotics.⁷³

The above groups, which together spend an average of at least \$20 million a year communicating the interests of the industrial food sector, are just some of the more prominent or recent food front groups. Other industry-tied groups that we discuss later in this report are using similar tactics and messages to create a drumbeat of support for industry’s agenda. In the next section, we look at some of the key messages these groups are promoting.