

17 Groups call on Ecover and Method to drop extreme genetic engineering plans

*Consumer, environmental, farming groups say
synthetic biology is not natural or sustainable*

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San Francisco, Calif.— In an [open letter](#) released today 17 national and international consumer, environmental, women’s health and farming groups called on leading “natural” cleaning and personal care products manufacturer Ecover and its U.S.-based subsidiary, Method Products Inc., to cancel plans to use oils and other ingredients derived from synthetic biology, a new and unregulated set of genetic engineering techniques. Earlier this month, Ecover announced it would switch to using oils produced by synthetic biology company Solazyme Inc. (SZYM) via synthetically engineered algae which feed on sugar.

The organizations, including Friends of the Earth, Center for Food Safety, Consumers Union, Women’s Voices for the Earth, Clean Production Action, Organic Consumers Association, and ETC Group, as well as watchdog and farmer groups in Brazil concerned about the environmental impacts of increased demand for Brazilian sugarcane, say the use of synthetic biology ingredients contradicts Ecover and Method’s branding as “sustainable” and “ecologically sound.”

“Synthetic biology is a new area of extreme genetic engineering and there are no regulations yet in place to deal with the implications of these new synthetic organisms. Our ability to even assess the risks is lagging way behind,” said Jim Thomas of ETC Group. “A wider switch to synthetic biology ingredients is likely to cause serious harm to biodiversity and farmers, and it is disappointing that Ecover and Method are leading the charge.”

Synthetic biology is the practice of artificially constructing genetic material such as DNA in order to create new forms of life or attempt to ‘reprogram’ existing organisms, such as yeast and algae. Synthetic biology companies claim that they can now generate millions of new, untested organisms per day. If a fraction of these synthetic organisms were released, the potential effects on health, the environment and farmer’s livelihoods are wide-ranging – from relatively benign to ecological and economic disruption.

The [New York Times reported](#) on Friday that synthetic biology ingredients are rapidly entering consumer products and food in absence of adequate health and environmental safety assessment, regulations or labeling.

“While other types of pollution can be cleaned up and do not breed, synbio organisms are designed to reproduce and, once released into the environment, they will be impossible to recall,” said Dana Perls of Friends of the Earth-U.S. “Consumers will likely reject these new, risky, unlabeled and virtually unregulated ‘GMOs 2.0.’ and we know that truly green, sustainable companies will as well.”

Ecover’s announcement did not disclose that the algal oil it plans to use in its products would be a product of synthetic biology or genetic modification.

“We are surprised that Ecover thinks its green-minded customers would want to be associated with an untested and unregulated technology,” says Michael Hansen, Senior Scientist at Consumers Union, the policy arm of Consumer Reports. “We are also disappointed that Ecover and Method have been less than straightforward about their decision. Products derived from Synthetically Modified Organisms (SMOs) should not be marketed as ‘natural,’ or ‘ecological’.”

Ecover claims synthetic biology algal oil will be a more sustainable replacement for palm oil in some products. While palm oil is a leading cause of deforestation, today’s open letter explains that synthetic biology oils are actually not a sustainable alternative. Solazyme raises its algae on sugarcane. Increased demand for sugar could result in destruction of biodiversity hotspots, including Brazil’s fragile and biodiverse cerrado and tropical forests in Latin America, Africa and South East Asia, for more sugar cane production.

Ecover representatives have confirmed that the company has the option of switching to coconut oil, a feedstock that is often more sustainably produced by small farmers. The ingredient in question, lauric acid, is routinely sourced from coconut oil.

“We welcome Ecover’s concern about environmentally destructive palm oil, but switching to Brazilian sugarcane and synthetic biology ingredients is not an improvement,” said Jeff Conant, a palm oil campaigner with Friends of the Earth. “Feeding an environmentally destructive material like sugarcane to synthetic organisms does not make it more environmentally friendly; it makes it less so.”

“As a socially and ecologically responsible alternative to palm kernel oil, which is often from palms grown on clear cut forest land, coconut oil, when obtained from well-managed established plantations, is far better than any solution based on synthetic biology,” explained Jaydee Hanson of Center for Food Safety. “That solution could support tropical farmers and really would be ‘natural’ rather than misleading consumers.”

The group's letter calls for Ecover to: pledge not to use ingredients derived from synthetic organisms; acknowledge that such ingredients cannot be considered 'natural,' 'green,' 'ecologically sound' or 'sustainable'; and join in calling for a moratorium on the commercial use and environmental release of organisms produced via synthetic biology.

“The commercial use of synthetic biology organisms is completely new, unregulated and the effects are unknown,” said Alexis Baden-Mayer of the Organic Consumers Association. “We need companies, individuals and governments to cooperate to put a moratorium on the release of these new organisms until we better understand the consequences of these decisions.”

The open letter sent to Ecover, along with a complete list of signatories, can be found [here](#).