
[Aotearoa/New Zealand: Scion's GE trees cut down!](#)

Since 2003, New Zealand's Scion has been carrying out a field trial planting of genetically engineered (GE) Radiata pine and Norway spruce trees at its research facilities in Rotorua. The GE trees contain reporter genes, herbicide resistance genes and genes which according to Scion are "thought to affect floral development". The trial is planned to last 22 years, although none of the trees will be left in the ground for more than 10 years.

In January 2008, someone got into Scion's GE tree experiment site by digging under the fence. They damaged 19 trees but no one seems to know whether any parts of the GE trees were removed. The protester (or protesters) left a spade with a "GE Free New Zealand" sticker on it.

The Soil and Health Association, a New Zealand NGO founded in 1941, has been campaigning for the GE tree trial to be stopped and the trees to be removed. Shortly before the trees were damaged, the Soil and Health Association put out a press release saying that Scion should take down its GE trees, pointing out that rabbits have burrowed under the fence surrounding the trial, creating the risk that GE plant material has been removed from the trial area.

Scion acknowledges that there are rabbits inside the GE tree trial site, but argues that the rabbits cannot leave the site because the fence is buried to a depth of 1.5 metres. Scion does not explain how the rabbits might have got inside the fence in the first place. Steffan Browning of the Soil and Health Association visited Scion's GE tree field test site in November 2007. He found evidence of rabbits inside and outside the trial site. He took photographs of "an obvious hole in and under the fence, which had clearly been there for some time."

In order to comply with Environmental Risk Management Authority (ERMA) requirements, Scion is supposed to carry out a weekly inspection of the fence. Scion's 2007 report to ERMA makes no mention of rabbits.

In a press release, Claire Bleakley of GE Free New Zealand says, "Each year GE Free (NZ) raises concerns over issues pertaining to compliance and we are always fobbed off. We must hope that no GE material was taken from the facility. Responsibility for this negligence and the carelessness leading to the breach should lie in part, with the inspection and monitoring agencies."

Browning notes that "ERMA has never declined an application for a GE field trial." He points out that there is a conflict of interest, in that "some ERMA decision makers [are] employed by other GE experimenting CRIs [Crown Research Institutions]".

New Zealand's Greens are not surprised that the GE trial should attract this sort of protest. "It's a bit like streakers at the one day cricket," states a post on the Greens' blog. Browning points out that the Soil and Health Association does not condone illegal acts, but, he told Radio New Zealand, "I struggle to disagree with the motives of whoever has done whatever it is. It does depend on what they've actually done and how responsible they've been with any material."

Scientists are outraged, reports the New Zealand Press Association. "The deliberate destruction of genetically modified trees at Scion is eco-terrorism and destroys knowledge and opportunity for all New Zealanders," says Dr William Rolleston, chairman of the Life Sciences Network, a pro-GE lobby group. Scion is a member of the Life Sciences Network.

In a 2002 article in the New Zealand Forest Industries magazine, Christian Walter, a senior scientist at Scion, explains the organisation's justification for its GE tree experiment: "We must gain a thorough understanding of the potential risks associated with GE in forestry and how they can be mitigated, before any commercialization can possibly take place. This inevitably involves field testing."

Elsbeth MacRae, Scion's Group Manager for Biomaterials Research says that "The express purpose of this trial is to assess the impacts, if any, of transgenic trees on the environment. Results to date show that soil microbial populations and insect biodiversity in a GE tree pine field test is unaffected." But the trial consists of only a few dozen trees. Clearly the environmental impact of industrial tree plantations of GE pine trees would be a completely different and even more dangerous experiment. As Felicity Perry of the People's Moratorium Enforcement Agency points out, field trials of GE trees are like "starting a bushfire to find out how badly it burns".

Scion has signed a research agreement with GE tree research company ArborGen, owned by International Paper, MeadWestvaco and Rubicon. Scion is conducting laboratory research aimed at producing GE trees which are easier to pulp. "As part of our commercial activities, Scion is providing research and development services to assist ArborGen with their tree improvement programme," MacRae says. "We can confirm that our service to ArborGen supports their research into GE trees."

Scion's GE trees are not welcome in New Zealand. "The destruction of the GE trees in Rotorua highlights the resistance to genetic engineering in Aotearoa/New Zealand. Because ERMA is not stopping GE material from being released into the environment, the people of Aotearoa have to intervene," says Felicity Perry of the People's Moratorium Enforcement Agency. "Overwhelmingly the population of Aotearoa wants this country to be GE Free."

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