
GE TREES

Genetically Engineered Eucalyptus Plantations Threaten Communities and Forests Around the World

In the United States, the US Department of Agriculture, which oversees the approval and release of GMOs in the US, has recently begun the process of legalizing the release of the very first genetically engineered (GE) forest tree in the US – a eucalyptus hybrid genetically engineered to be freeze tolerant. It will not, however, only impact forests and communities in the US, but all over the world.

The USDA has been a revolving door with the infamous GMO giant Monsanto. Many staff at the USDA once worked for Monsanto. As a result, the USDA has never rejected a GMO plant that industry has sought commercial approval for.

In January 2011, GE tree company ArborGen requested USDA permission to sell billions of genetically engineered freeze tolerant eucalyptus clones for vast plantations across South Carolina, Georgia, Florida, Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana and Texas.

ArborGen also has many staff that come from Monsanto. Their former CEO, Barbara Wells, was previously the head of Monsanto's RoundUp Ready GMO Soy Division in Brazil for 18 years.

The USDA has recently begun accepting public comments for an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) on ArborGen's request to commercially release GE eucalyptus trees. This is the first time the USDA has ever prepared a full EIS on a GE plant without being forced to through a lawsuit. This indicates that the USDA knows that GE eucalyptus trees will have significant and dangerous impacts on the environment.

But this environmental impact statement is also the first step of the USDA process to approve GE eucalyptus trees.

Living Firecrackers

Eucalyptus trees are already documented as an invasive species in California and Florida. ArborGen has engineered them to be freeze tolerant, enabling them to survive temperatures down to 16°F – vastly expanding the range where they could invade. Due to their invasive nature, The Charlotte Observer called them “the kudzu of the 2010s.” Kudzu is the infamous vine that was introduced into the US in 1876 and has now taken over three million hectares of land across the same states where GE tree plantations are planned. It completely covers the landscape, smothering existing vegetation and swallowing any structures in its way.

But there is one important difference between invasive eucalyptus trees and invasive kudzu vines. Eucalyptus trees are highly flammable. They have been called “living firecrackers” due to their explosive flammability in dry conditions.

A catastrophic eucalyptus wildfire in Australia in 2009 moved at speeds over 100 kilometers per hour and killed 200 people.

Eucalyptus plantations deplete ground water and can even worsen droughts. The US Forest Service points out that GE eucalyptus trees will use twice as much water as native forests.

Green Deserts

Non-native GE eucalyptus trees provide no habitat for wildlife. Threatened and endangered species could become extinct if millions of acres of GE eucalyptus plantations are developed.

In Brazil, eucalyptus plantations are called “green deserts” because they devastate biodiversity.

GE eucalyptus trees are not yet legalized. We can stop this irreversible environmental catastrophe before it occurs. But we need to act now.

But these frankentrees are not just a threat to the US. If GE eucalyptus trees are perfected here, they could be exported all over the world. Because they are freeze tolerant, they could grow where conventional eucalyptus could not. Thus the disaster of eucalyptus plantations could spread further North, South and to higher elevations – to ecosystems and communities previously untouched by the disaster of eucalyptus plantations.

Why GE eucalyptus? In the US, the main reason for developing GE eucalyptus trees is for biomass –to burn them for electricity production. Some will also be digested into liquid biofuels. ArborGen’s parent company Rubicon projects sales of half a billion GE eucalyptus seedlings every year for bioenergy plantations across the US South.

In the UK, coal-fired power plants are being converted to burn wood. Much of the wood they will burn will be imported from the US and elsewhere. Forests and communities are being threatened by schemes to turn wood into electricity under the guise of “renewable energy.”

But the rapidly escalating demand for so-called “bioenergy” is already driving a massive global land grab as communities are pushed off of their lands to make way for plantations of oil palm, jatropha, soy or other monocultures. With the addition of GE eucalyptus plantations for wood-based bioenergy, this land grab will only intensify, threatening some of the last forests and forest dependent communities. It must be stopped.

In late May, we will be confronting the GE trees industry at the Tree Biotechnology 2013 Conference in Asheville, NC. This is a bi-annual global gathering of researchers, industry representatives and students who come together to advance biotechnology in trees. We are organizing a series of protests, teach-ins, press conferences and other events in order to raise widespread public awareness about the dangers of GE trees, and remind researchers that there is widespread public opposition to their dangerous research.

To learn more about the campaign; to sign on as an organization to our call for a global ban on the release of GE trees into the environment, go to: <http://nogetrees.org>

By Anne Petermann, Global Justice Ecology Project, e-mail:
anneepetermann@gmail.com, <http://globaljusticeecology.org>

See also the comments sent by WRM to the US authorities asking them not to release GE freeze tolerant trees

at <http://wrn.org.uy/other-relevant-information/comment-by-the-world-rainforest-movement-on-the-petition-of-arborgen-inc-seeking-a-determination-of-nonregulated-status-for-freeze-tolerant-eucalyptus/>