
Action in the CBD against GM trees

A group of social and environmental networks and organizations, concerned about the possibility that the United Nations finally endorse policies that accept and promote genetically engineered trees, warned of their potential harm, that would be aggravated within the model of large-scale monoculture.

Below is the “Open letter to participants at the 10th Conference of the Parties to the Convention (COP 10) on Biological Diversity (CBD) and the 5th Meeting of the Parties of the Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety (MOP 5) to be held in Nagoya, Japan in October 2010

Stop the Extermination of Biodiversity-- Stop Genetically Engineered trees

The United Nations Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) born out of the 1992 Earth Summit, was supposed to provide an international legal instrument to ensure the protection of biodiversity—recognized as an invaluable global asset for the survival of present and future generations. It was supposed to recognize the need to travel on a path of development that did not involve the destruction of biodiversity and that had a social justice framework.

Today we reaffirm this need, but note that we are getting further from the goal. The world is being swept up by powerful corporate forces whose main consideration is profit, leading to a development based on extermination, exploitation and exclusion. These forces are also at work at the CBD, as evidenced by the effort to legitimize genetically engineered trees— a new tool of control, domination and extermination.

There are two very dangerous aspects of the GE trees model: genetic engineering - with its many unanswered questions and unknown long-term consequences - and the monoculture model, based on absolute control. Monocultures also require the appropriation of ever-increasing amounts of land at the expense of food sovereignty. They result in the extermination of ecosystems, soil, water and the communities living in and with these ecosystems.

Genetically engineering agricultural crops to increase the profits of the patent-holding corporations has resulted in the devastation of biodiversity. Development of GE trees - whether manipulated to reduce lignin content, resist insects, grow faster or withstand the cold – converges the business model of endless-growth-at-any-cost with the monoculture model, which already thrives on the extermination of diverse ecosystems. GE trees have the additional threat of invading and contaminating wild forests, thereby enhancing the threat to biodiversity.

Monoculture tree plantations, linked with the research in genetic engineering, are a cause of land appropriation at the expense of food sovereignty. They also cause the destruction of other ecosystems, soil, water and the communities living in those ecosystems.

There are several doors through which GE trees can invade the CBD:

Agrofuels and Wood-Based Bioenergy – Industrial plantations of trees engineered to grow faster, be

more densely planted, survive in colder climates, or be more easily transformed into liquid fuel are the perfect feedstocks for bioenergy. The massive increase in demand for wood that will accompany increased use of wood-based bioenergy will greatly accelerate deforestation, the conversion of forests and grasslands to plantations, and the wholesale loss of biological and cultural diversity. Scientists project that the result of this exponentially growing demand for wood will be the complete conversion of all native forests and grasslands to tree and crop monocultures by 2060.

Forests - The FAO definition of forests adopted by the CBD includes tree monocultures, which bear as much resemblance to forests as corn fields to native grasslands. This allows industrial plantations, completely devoid of diversity, to be promoted and subsidized in so-called “reforestation” “afforestation” and “forest restoration” efforts.

Climate Mitigation - Among the mechanisms the UNFCCC has proposed to tackle climate change, are several that will exacerbate the situation. These include use of tree plantations as carbon sinks (which will enable emissions to continue unabated), the "increase of forest carbon stocks" (REDD+), which wrongly incentivizes fast growing tree monocultures, and recently, "biochar" - charcoal buried in the soil, derived from burning trees. REDD can even include GE trees.

On the other hand, in the Meeting of the Parties to the Cartagena Protocol, the topic of risk assessment of transgenic trees will also be on the agenda. The purpose of risk assessment should be to avoid impacts on the environment, biodiversity, human health and the social and economic welfare of the population. Therefore, the backbone of risk assessment should be the principle of precaution. It is already known that GE trees companies plan to export their GE trees around the world. In fact, they already are. U.S.-based ArborGen has taken a eucalyptus hybrid from Brazil, sent it to their New Zealand labs for modification, and then to the U.S. for mass-cloning and outdoor testing. This intentional transboundary movement of GMO trees must be stopped.

Therefore, it is necessary that the MOP 5 and the COP 10 strengthen the decision established in 2006, when the uncertainties associated with potential environmental and socioeconomic impacts, including long-term impacts and cross-border of genetically modified trees on global forest biological diversity as well as on the livelihoods of indigenous and local communities were acknowledged and the precautionary approach recommended.

For life and Biodiversity. No to transgenic trees!!”

Signed by: Coecoceiba AT Costa Rica, Econexus, ETC Group, Global Justice Ecology Project, FASE, FOEI (Friends of the Earth International) OLCA, RALLT (Network for a free GE Latin America), RECOMA (Latinamerican network against Monoculture Tree Plantations), Redes AT Uruguay, Sobrevivencia AT Paraguay, World Rainforest Movement