
Growing networking against GE trees

From the Amazon to Finland, New Zealand and Chile, from Indigenous Peoples to European NGOs, from women to youth groups, in just a week nearly 140 people got connected and became involved in the gathering of signatures for an Open Letter demanding a ban on the release of genetically engineered (GE) trees.

The letter (1), denouncing the impacts of GE trees on the environment and on people, was handed over to the 13th meeting of the Convention on Biological Diversity's (CBD) Subsidiary Body on Scientific, Technical and Technological Advice (SBSTTA) that took place in Rome, Italy. The signatures came from members of organizations from countries where research on the genetic modification of trees is being carried out: Aotearoa/New Zealand, Australia, Belgium, Brazil, Canada, Chile, China, Finland, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, Poland, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, The Netherlands, United Kingdom and US.

A web of connections quickly developed, and a simple letter evolved into a tool for action, where people got involved and in some cases were informed about something they were unaware of. Such was the case of a person from Spain who wrote: "I've just read about GE trees and feel it is a very threatening issue. I didn't know about this."

Though each and everyone of the signatories became a participant of the initiative, the prevailing feeling was that of being thankful, reflected by expressions like "I would be happy to sign", "thanks for the initiative", "keep up the great work", "keep up the struggle."

People expressed their concern as well as their sorrow. "As a member of the Secwepemc (Shuswap) nation, I am very concerned about the genetic engineering of the poplar trees since our people had a very special relationship with the tree for thousands of years. ... I am also expressing our deep concern over the long term ecological implications of genetic engineering of plants, as well as the implications of corporate control of plant life that goes along with genetic technology."

Underlying the issue is the awareness that most voices are not being heard, and that most people have never been consulted about this. A friend from Brazil put it this way: "I join the signature campaign convinced that we must protect our native flora and we commit our efforts to make the voices of those who cannot say what they think and feel to be heard."

Concerns were expressed about specific issues such as the potential cross-pollination of GE trees with natural trees, thus permanently damaging genetic biodiversity, as well as the potential impacts on human health, as in the following message: "GM pollen will be widely inhaled by people and this may have health effects, especially if the trees have been engineered to produce a pesticide."

People were eager to exchange updates and news related to GE trees. From Belgium we got to know that: "it might be interesting for you to know that currently an application for a field trial with GM poplar trees is [being] considered. The minister will take the final decision on the authorisation the coming month." A person from Canada informed that: "The Canadian Government (the Canadian

Forest Service of Natural Resources Canada) is field testing GE trees in Quebec: our last information is that field tests include poplar and insect resistant spruce.” Friends from South Africa expressed that: “The industry players deny that they have any field trials, but it seems that there could be some happening even if not approved by government. We will need to investigate further to see if there is any proof.” The news from Finland was that: “unfortunately Finland in general has been among the few countries who have always voted in favour of GMOs. I think there is a strong scientific lobby on their behalf.”

As a result of the dissemination of the sign-on letter, a number of Brazilian social organizations (2) sent a letter to the Brazilian delegate at SBSTTA urging him “to advocate that CBD SBSTTA reaffirm the resolution of COP8 recommending the adoption of a precautionary approach based on the Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety. Furthermore, in the light of the lack and uncertainty of scientific reports related to the use of GE trees, it should be recommended not to perform field studies. ... A case-by-case evaluation would be contrary to the principles of the CBD and would respond to the corporate interests of the forestry and biotechnology industries.”

Similar action was carried out by a group of Latin American and Argentine organizations (3) who addressed an Open Letter to the Argentine Delegation at the Rome meeting, demanding that liberation of genetically manipulated trees be prohibited.

It is clear that tackling the issue of GE trees requires a strong opposition movement and in that respect we quote a Brazilian friend that warned: “This is one of the BIG issues and only being very united will we be able to force a change in course.”

He is of course right and that’s precisely why networking and campaigning at the local and global level are so necessary. We therefore invite everyone to sign on a similar letter to be sent to the upcoming CBD COP 9 (4), and –more importantly- to become involved to stop this insanity.

(1) [see letter at http://www.wrm.org.uy/actors/BDC/SBSTTA13/GE_Trees_Campaign.html]

(2) (including Marcha Mundial de Mulheres (a global women’s group), Movimento dos Pequenos Agricultores (a small farmers’ group), Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra (a landless rural workers’ group), Movimento de Mulheres Camponesas (a peasant women’s group), Terra de Directos (a human rights’ group)

(3) (Movimiento Campesino de Santiago del Estero-Vía Campesina (Santiago del Estero Peasant Movement – Via Campesina) Centro de Políticas Públicas para el Socialismo (Centre for Public Policies for Socialism), GRAIN, Grupo de Reflexión Rural (Rural Reflection Group), Movimiento Semillero de Misiones (Misiones Seed Movement), Centro de Acción Popular Olga Márquez de Arédez (Olga Marquez de Aredez Centre for Grass-roots Action), Juventud Indígena Argentina, (Argentine Indigenous Youth Movement), El Aguamanda-Gualeguaychú, (Water Commands in Gualeguaychu), Grupo de Ecología Política, Comunidades y Derechos (Group for Ecological Policy, Communities and Rights), Red por una América Latina Libre de Transgénicos (Network for a Latin America Free from Transgenic trees).

(4) contact Ana Filippini, e-mail: anafili@wrm.org.uy

Article based on messages received from people who signed on to the letter

