
GE Trees: Contradictions in United Nations Conventions

The 9th Conference of the Parties of the United Nations Convention on Climate Change held in Milan in 2003 allowed Northern companies and governments to establish plantations in the South under the Kyoto Protocol's "Clean Development Mechanism" (CDM), allegedly to absorb carbon dioxide and to store carbon. COP-9 allowed the use of plantations of genetically engineered (GE) trees [also known as genetically modified, GM, or transgenic trees] as carbon sinks, that is to supposedly offset carbon emissions

From then on, several organizations and representatives from social movements from Eastern and Western Europe, as well as North and South America have challenged the large-scale tree monoculture model because of its negative social and environmental impacts, and have demanded a ban on GE trees (see WRM Bulletin N° 90). In March 2006, a call for a moratorium on the release of genetically engineered trees into the environment was raised at the UN Convention on Biological Diversity's Eighth Conference of the Parties in Curitiba, Brazil. The CBD took a historic decision: a recommendation that countries exercise caution when approaching the potential use of genetically engineered trees. The decision, acknowledging for the first time the potential social and ecological dangers of GE trees, would help slow down the headlong rush to commercialize GE trees.

The fact that the CBD was able to take such a strong stance against GE trees indicates the high level of concern over the unique and important threats posed by genetically engineered trees. Geneticist Dr. Ricarda Steinbrecher of the Federation of German Scientists sums it up this way, "this CBD outcome, recommending a precautionary approach to GE trees, represents a first step in recognizing the dangers of GE trees. It will assist NGOs and scientists alike in sending an urgent alert to all nations that there is insufficient scientific data on the implications of GE trees, which pose a threat to forests and indigenous and local peoples globally—and therefore it is crucial to halt all releases at least until such data and assessments become available."

However, while the CBD acknowledges the potential damages of GE trees, the Climate Change Convention accepts its use. This is the reason why a number of organizations have decided to send a strong message to the Climate Convention to be held in Nairobi next November. They have produced an open letter to the delegates requesting the UNFCCC to end "the contradiction between its own pro-GE trees decision and the UN CBD's strong decision against GE trees", to "bring its policies in line with those of the UN CBD" and to "immediately prohibit the release of genetically engineered trees."

Destructive plantations are not the solution for the energy crisis, and GE trees plantations could be a real disaster for Humanity.