
[UN Convention on Biological Diversity: Important decision on GE trees](#)

The Eighth Conference of the Parties of the United Nations Convention on Biological Diversity ended on March 31st with two important and related decisions: an upholding of the moratorium on the use of so-called “terminator technology,” and a recommendation that countries exercise caution when approaching the potential use of genetically engineered trees. The issues became related during the deliberations over the issue of extending the moratorium on the use of the dangerous “terminator technology,” the genetic engineering of plants to produce sterile seeds that cannot be replanted. The connection emerged when industry made the argument that they needed terminator technology to enable them to address the contamination problems of commercializing GE trees.

As a result of this link between the issues, the Ban Terminator Campaign and the STOP GE Trees Campaign worked collaboratively to spell out the inherent dangers of both of these technologies and why they both needed to be banned outright.

The COP-8 decided to uphold the Terminator moratorium during the first week of meetings, though countries such as Canada and New Zealand tried unsuccessfully to derail this agreement on several later occasions. The decision on the issue of genetically engineered trees came to a close late on the last night of the COP. This historic decision, acknowledging for the first time the potential dangers—both social and ecological—of genetically engineered trees and urging countries to take a very cautious approach to the technology, will help slow down the headlong rush to commercialize GE trees.

The decision states in part: “The Conference of the Parties, recognizing the uncertainties related to the potential environmental and socio-economic impacts, including long-term and trans-boundary impacts, of genetically modified trees on global forest biological diversity, as well as on the livelihoods of indigenous and local communities, and given the absence of reliable data and of capacity in some countries to undertake risk assessments and to evaluate those potential impacts... recommends parties to take a precautionary approach when addressing the issue of genetically modified trees.” The decision also called for the initiation of a global compilation of data on the social and environmental implications of GE tree release, in a process that includes the participation of relevant organizations, including indigenous and local communities.

The fact that the CBD was able to take such a strong stance against GE trees on the first occasion that the issue was introduced, and despite behind the scenes pressure from the United States and industry, indicates the high level of concern over the unique and important threats posed by genetically engineered trees. Ricardo Carrere, of World Rainforest Movement summarizes the concerns over GE trees. “GE trees are one of the most dangerous threats to forests, which host most of the Earth’s terrestrial biodiversity. The release of GE trees will inevitably and irreversibly contaminate forest ecosystems and destroy biodiversity.”

During the opening round of talks of the COP-8 Forest Biological Diversity Working Group, where the GE trees issue was scheduled, ten countries called for a halt to the release of GE trees into the environment, starting with Iran, and followed by Ghana, Malawi, Ecuador, the Philippines, Senegal,

Norway, Madagascar, Egypt and Rwanda. They were joined in this call by the International Indigenous Forum on Biodiversity, Greenpeace, the Women's Caucus and the Federation of German Scientists. In subsequent discussions, Liberia played an important role in strengthening the COP-8 decision on GE trees.

This is an important step forward for the global campaign to stop GE trees. Corporations such as Arborgen are rapidly moving ahead with steps to commercialize GE trees in countries such as Brazil, Chile, India and South Africa. The COP-8 decision will provide a political leverage point for organizations opposing GE tree plantation development in countries that are members of the UN CBD. The decision will also help advance the STOP GE Trees Campaign in the United States. For even though the U.S. is not a party to the CBD, the threat of eliminating potential locations for future plantations (and future profits) will send a chill through the industry, helping stifle on-going and expensive GE trees research. For example, Arborgen considers Brazil its "most important geography." If movements in Brazil are successful at stopping the expansion of monoculture tree plantations, including future GE tree plantations, Arborgen may find it difficult to continue to secure funding for ongoing research for a product with little future.

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."

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COP - Decision VIII/19 - Forest biological diversity: implementation of the programme of work