
[The release of GM trees must be banned](#)

Ever since Western forestry science defined forests as predominantly wood-producing entities, efforts have concentrated on increasing productivity of one single product: wood. Diverse forests were simplified, by weeding out all the species that industry was not interested in, while promoting the absolute predominance of "valuable" trees in the forest.

From that reductionist approach the following step appeared to be obvious: to substitute forests by large stands of fast-growing monoculture tree plantations. During the last decades, a few species of eucalyptus, pines and acacias began to cover large areas of what had previously been forests or grasslands, thus substantially reducing forest biodiversity and appropriating local peoples' lands and livelihoods. They were defined as either "forest plantations" or "planted forests", thus concealing the fact that they had nothing in common with forests and, more importantly, hiding their massive negative social and environmental impacts.

But that was not enough. Industry wanted more, so the next step was to initiate a genetic selection process, whereby only some genetic traits were considered, such as fast growth, height, diameter, wood quality, and straight trunks with few branches. The genetic base of the chosen tree species was thus further impoverished. Very soon those "super-trees" began to be cloned and plantations became single-species and clonal at the same time.

Within that logic, there was nothing more evident than the need to go a step further into genetically modifying trees to make them even more amenable to industry.

However, the dangers of genetically modified (GM) trees are in some ways even more serious than those posed by GM crops. Trees live longer than agricultural crops, which means that changes in their metabolism may occur many years after they are planted. At the same time, trees are also different from crops in that they are largely undomesticated and scientists' knowledge about forest ecosystems is poor. This implies that the ecological and other potential risks associated with GM trees are far greater than in the case of crops.

Additionally, GM trees would exacerbate the impacts of the large-scale tree monoculture model which is being increasingly challenged by local communities and organizations throughout the world precisely because of its impacts. Water would be depleted more quickly by faster-growing trees; biodiversity would be further destroyed in biological deserts containing trees engineered to be insect resistant, flowerless, fruitless and seedless; the soil would be destroyed at a faster rate through higher biomass extraction, intensive mechanization and increased agrochemical use; more communities would be deprived of their means of livelihoods and displaced to make way for even more of these "green deserts".

For those and many other reasons, the World Rainforest Movement and Friends of the Earth International decided to produce a report on the GM trees issue, which has now been finalized and its findings will be presented during the Conference of the Parties of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change next month in Buenos Aires, Argentina.

The main reason for having chosen that venue is that at its last meeting in late 2003, the Convention on Climate Change explicitly allowed the inclusion of GM trees to act as "carbon sinks" within the framework of the Kyoto Protocol's Clean Development Mechanism. That grave decision was taken at the last minute, with practically no discussion or participation from concerned groups and governments. That totally unexpected and dangerous outcome means that now this Convention not only supports the expansion of monoculture tree plantations supposedly to act as "carbon sinks", regardless of their negative social and environmental impacts, but allows those same plantations to be composed of GM trees, thus multiplying the impacts and adding new risks and uncertainties.

Together with many other groups, in Buenos Aires we will therefore call upon all governments present at the Conference of the Parties to the Convention on Climate Change to change course on this issue and to ban the release of GM trees.

PS. The WRM-FoEI study, carried out by researcher Chris Lang ("Genetically Modified Trees: the ultimate threat to forests"), is being published in English and Spanish and will be soon available in the WRM web page at: <http://www.wrm.org.uy/publications/index.html> , and in the FoEI page at <http://www.foei.org/publications> . It will also be available in printed format in those languages at WRM and FoEI offices and all our readers will be informed once they become available.