
Does the World Bank have a position on GM trees?

Perhaps I'm being naïve, but I really thought that the World Bank would have a position on GM trees. The first field trial of GM trees was in 1988. Surely, I thought, 16 years is long enough for the Bank's policy experts to come up with something. When the Bank's shiny new forest policy came out two years ago, it did so after a "stakeholder consultative process" which was "supported by extensive analytical, technical and economic studies, some commissioned by the World Bank and others done by independent institutions and NGOs on a wide range of subjects," according to the Bank. Surely the new policy has something to say on GM trees?

Er, no. The World Bank's Forest Policy makes no mention of GM trees. Neither does the World Bank's Forest Strategy, a 99-page report (plus appendices) which the Bank claims "provides nuanced guidance on the different actions that should be considered in different circumstances".

The Bank's Forest Policy does state that the Bank will only fund plantations that are "environmentally appropriate, socially beneficial, and economically viable." This would, in a just and fair world, exclude any GM tree plantations as they are neither "environmentally appropriate" nor "socially beneficial". But some of those experts at the World Bank have some pretty strange ideas about what is "appropriate" and "beneficial" for rural communities living thousands of miles from Washington DC.

The World Bank, through its Carbon Finance Unit is keen on financing carbon projects, including tree plantations as carbon sinks. Since December 2003, the Kyoto Protocol allows plantations of GM trees as carbon sinks to be included under its clean development mechanism. So far no GM tree carbon sink plantations have been established but scientists at Oak Ridge National Laboratory, for example, are working on producing carbon storing GM trees.

I was curious to find out whether this meant that the World Bank might be funding GM tree carbon sinks in the future, so on 21 July 2004, I wrote to Jason Steele at the World Bank's Carbon Finance Unit to ask a few questions about GM trees. A week later he told me he was "still trying" to find the answers.

A couple of months later, when I'd still not heard anything, I thought I should jog his memory. I wrote again, told him I was working on an article, the deadline was mid-November and I'd like an on-the-record response. Steele responded immediately, but only to pass me on to the Carbon Finance Unit's Senior Communication Officer, Anita Gordon.

I asked Anita Gordon the same questions I'd asked Jason Steele two months earlier. Gordon also responded immediately, but only to pass me on to the Carbon Finance Unit's Stakeholder Relations Specialist, Charles Cormier.

I met Charles Cormier in June 2004 at the World Bank organised Carbon Expo in Cologne, Germany. I asked him for an interview about Plantar, an industrial tree plantation project in Brazil funded by the World Bank's Prototype Carbon Fund (PCF). In terms of the amount of carbon emissions the project

is supposed to save, Plantar is by far the largest project on PCF's books. Cormier turned down my request for an interview. "I don't know anything about Plantar," he said.

PCF's contract with Plantar requires that Plantar is certified as well managed by the Forest Stewardship Council. If the FSC certification is withdrawn for any reason, PCF will stop the payments to Plantar. FSC standards state that the "use of genetically modified organisms shall be prohibited". So, at least in Plantar's case, the World Bank will not fund GM tree plantations.

"Charles Cormier will get back to you on your query," Anita Gordon promised me back in September. I still haven't heard from him. Perhaps I shouldn't be too surprised.

I looked up the "Who's Who" page of the World Bank's Forests and Forestry web-site and wrote to the 18 Bank staff listed on that page to ask them about the World Bank's policy on GM trees. I even clicked on a little button and sent an e-mail to the Bank's "Advisory Service". The Bank's web-site describes these people as "experts and specialists". They should, at least in theory, know the World Bank's position on important forestry issues like GM trees. But apart from four "out of office" automatic replies, I haven't heard anything from any of them.

For the record, here are the four questions that I would like someone at the World Bank to answer:

1. Does the World Bank have any guidelines on funding projects which include GM trees?
2. In a question and answer sheet on its new forest policy, the World Bank states that "The strategy does not commit the Bank to any such activities [i.e. carbon forestry and carbon trading] unless these are specifically allowed under the Clean Development Mechanism or Joint Implementation mechanisms of the Kyoto Protocol" Since GM trees are included in the Kyoto Protocol, does this mean that the Bank can fund GM tree plantations as carbon sinks?
3. Does the Prototype Carbon Fund (or any of the other World Bank carbon financing mechanisms) have any guidelines on funding projects which include GM trees? If so, please provide details.
4. If there are World Bank documents which clarify the Bank's position on GM trees, could you please send me copies?

I'm sure I can't be the only one who would like to know the answers to these questions. So, if anyone in the World Bank is reading this, I'd be delighted to hear from you.

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