
[USA: Potlatch Corporation, FSC certification and GM trees](#)

Potlatch Corporation's 7000 hectares of poplar plantations in Boardman, Oregon are just about as high tech as a plantation can be. The trees are planted in the sandy desert soil and will only grow because of tens of thousands of kilometres of thin black hosepipe. Water, fertilizer and pesticides are pumped to the trees through the irrigation pipes. The water for the irrigation comes from the John Day Dam, constructed by the US Army Corps Engineers in 1971. The dam is one of the 19 dams that block the Columbia River and which have devastated salmon fisheries in the river.

Potlatch's plantations are monocultures of clonal hybrid poplars. In 1999, the company allowed Oregon State University to start a trial plantation of genetically modified (herbicide tolerant and insect resistant) poplar trees on 1.2 hectares of its land. Potlatch was one of the founding members of Oregon State University's Tree Genetic Engineering Research Cooperative (TGERC). "They're top-of-the-line scientists with an international reputation. TGERC gives us a very big bang for our buck," explained Jake Eaton, Potlatch's research manager, in 1999."

Potlatch's direct involvement with GM technology was set back when the company decided it wanted to sell the timber to Home Depot, the world's largest home improvement store. In 1999, to get environmental activists off its case, Home Depot produced a wood purchasing policy which "gives preference" to timber from "certified well managed forests". Today, Home Depot sells more Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) certified wood than any other retailer in the US. Potlatch decided FSC certification was just what it needed.

Because FSC's standards prohibit the use of any GMOs in certified forestry operations Potlatch agreed to remove the GM trees in December 2000. Eight months later, Scientific Certification Systems (SCS) certified Potlatch's plantations as well managed according to FSC's standards.

Yet at the time the certificate was awarded, the GM trees were still growing in Potlatch's plantations. SCS even gave Potlatch another four months to clear the trees. "By December 31, 2001 Potlatch must follow through with their commitment to remove the 2-year old sexually immature transgenic hybrid poplars and continue to abstain from GMO research on their eastern Oregon facility," SCS's assessors wrote in the public summary of the certification assessment.

SCS did not check whether the trees had been removed until June 2002, six months after the deadline, when SCS's assessor Dave Wagner carried out an annual audit of Potlatch's Boardman plantations.

"The genetically modified hybrid poplar trees were removed prior to December 31, 2001," Wager noted. However, he continued, "Following removal, there was some re-sprouting that had not been treated at the time of the 2002 annual audit." More than nine months after the certificate was awarded, Potlatch still had GM trees sprouting on its land.

SCS did not withdraw the certificate, but issued a corrective action request. Once again, Potlatch did not have to do anything until the end of the year: "By December 31, 2002 Potlatch must remove

stumps and associated sprouts from the genetically modified hybrid poplar trees that were removed.”

Once again, SCS did not check whether Potlatch had removed the GM tree stumps and sprouts until six months after the deadline. In June 2003, Barry Sims, a Portland-based forestry consultant and SCS assessor, carried out an annual audit of Potlatch’s Boardman plantations.

“All GMO material has been removed,” Sims reported, without explaining what evidence had helped him to reach this conclusion. He does not mention in the public summary whether he inspected the area himself, or if he simply asked Potlatch staff.

After each annual audit, SCS’s assessors arrived at a word-for-word identical conclusion: “the overall level of forest stewardship has clearly been strengthened on the forest estate over the past year.” This conclusion is surprising, not least because the only thing Potlatch’s high tech plantations have in common with forests is that they are full of trees.

More importantly, cutting poplar trees and leaving the stumps in the ground is a hopelessly inadequate way of removing poplars from a piece of land, whether the poplars are GM or non-GM. “All poplars tend to sprout vigorously from stumps after trees are cut,” explains Oregon State University’s Steven Strauss.

Matthius Fladung, of the Institute for Forest Genetics and Forest Tree Breeding near Hamburg in Germany, has documented how difficult it can be to remove all traces of GM poplars from the soil. Fladung’s trial was completed in 2001 and the plot cleared of trees. Eighteen months later, Fladung reported, root shoots of the GM trees were still present in the soil.

Fladung is concerned that “conclusions should be drawn carefully from the fact that root suckers appear several months after clearing the field trial.” If the trial is nowhere near any other poplar trees then it is simple, “because every poplar plant must be transgenic”. However, if there are other poplar trees around “it might be difficult to distinguish between transgenic and non-transgenic root suckers,” says Fladung.

It is improbable that any GM poplar trees have managed to grow from the roots that Potlatch has apparently left in the ground. It is improbable, perhaps, but not impossible. Certainly SCS was in breach of FSC rules in awarding a certificate to a company that was growing GM trees on its land. That SCS did not check more carefully that Potlatch had removed all traces of the GM poplar trees is a scandal.

By: Chris Lang, e-mail: <http://chrislang.org>