
Finland: Some remarks on the campaign against GM trees

In June 2004, unknown activists attacked the last remaining trial of genetically modified trees in Finland. About 400 GM birch trees were felled. How should we react now? That was the first question for GM tree campaigners when we heard about the attack.

Our campaign against GM trees in Finland started in 2000, when I was among a small group of concerned activists who formed the People's Biosafety Association (PBA) to monitor GMOs in Finland. Earlier the same year, the Finnish Forest Research Institute received permission for a trial of GM trees in Punkaharaj.

In spring 2000, PBA asked the Board of Genetechnology for the location of all GMO field trials in Finland. They told us that there were 13 open field releases and more than 130 trials in laboratories or greenhouses, but refused to release the locations of the trials, arguing that there was no register of GMO trials. Yet according to Finland's Gene Technology Act a publicly available register of all GMO trials must be kept.

Our next move was to take the case to the Supreme Administrative Court. In response, the Board of Genetechnology released a remarkable statement. Signed by Pirjo Mäkelä, the Board's chair, the statement admitted the risks involved, explaining that any unauthorized visits to the GM field trials might cause a danger to the environment and to people's health. Therefore, the Board argued, the location of the field trials must remain secret.

In October 2001, I wrote an article titled "Finland should oppose genetic modification of trees" for Finland's largest circulation newspaper, Helsingin Sanomat. During the next week the newspaper published two pro-GMO articles written by forestry scientists and declined to publish an article that I sent them countering the scientists' arguments.

PBA then launched a petition demanding that these field trials should be stopped. We pointed out that no adequate assessment of the risks had been carried out and people living near to the GMO trials had not even been informed. Early in 2002, PBA presented the petition, signed by 1500 people, to Osmo Soininvaara, Minister of Social and Health Affairs and leader of Finland's Green League political party.

PBA decided to find out for ourselves where the GM tree trials were. We discovered that there were two field trails, one in Punkaharju and another in Viikki, near Helsinki.

The Finnish public found out about the GM tree field trials on 22 July 2002 when the television news showed PBA's activists hammering biohazard warning signs into the ground next to the trials. A few months later the Finnish Supreme Administrative Court announced its decision that the location of the GM field trials should be made public. However, no real public discussion of the risks took place.

In December 2003, with the Finnish media apparently having lost interest, the campaign against GM trees received another blow. In Milan, at a UN climate change meeting, governments decided to

allow plantations of GM trees as carbon sinks under the Kyoto Protocol's "clean development mechanism".

In response, three Finnish NGOs (People's Biosafety Association, Friends of the Earth Finland and Union of Ecoforestry), launched an international petition demanding a UN ban on GM trees. In May 2004, PBA took part in a side event on GM trees at the UN Forum on Forests in Geneva. By then 1600 people and 140 NGOs had signed on to the petition.

On returning from Geneva, PBA continued to try to raise the issue of GM trees publicly. We visited the Finnish Parliament to tell parliamentarians about our message to the UN. We invited several forestry scientists involved in GM tree research to a PBA press conference. Only three journalists turned up and no scientists.

In June 2004 we got some good news, at last! Kim von Weissenberg, Professor of Forest Pathology at Helsinki University told WRM's Chris Lang that Helsinki University's GM birch tree field trial "was terminated in the fall of 2003".

The media silence on GM trees was shattered when activists destroyed Finland's only other field trial of GM trees.

The forestry scientists responsible for the trial now claimed that the purpose of the trial was to examine environmental risks, in particular the risk of genetic pollution and the stability of the transferred genes. In fact, the aim of the experiment was to study carbon-nitrogen processes, looking at the impact on growth rates.

In addition to lying about the purpose of their GM tree trial, the forestry scientists appear to be in breach of Finnish law. PBA had argued all along that no proper risk assessment had been conducted BEFORE establishing these field trials and now they actually admitted that by launching a new study which would study these risks on the ongoing field trial.

Under Finnish law, risk assessments must take into account current developments and knowledge and the Board of Genetechnology must be informed of any new discoveries which may affect the previous risk assessment.

PBA argues that the forestry scientists must have some new information about gene pollution and gene instability: they have even received funding from the Finnish Academy for the new study on these risks.

Before continuing the field trial they should therefore have informed the Board of Genetechnology of this new information which gives the need for new risk assessment studies.

Together with the Finnish Union of Ecoforestry, PBA has made a formal complaint about this apparent breach of Finnish law. The authorities are currently considering the complaint, before they decide whether to start a legal process.

After four years campaigning against GM trees, we are optimistic that there will be no new GM tree trials in Finland.

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