United States: Kinkos says no to genetically engineered trees

Genetic engineering is racing ahead to provide genetically tailored trees designed for commercial plantations with traits such as herbicide resistance, insecticide production, rapid growth and reduced lignin content in trees for commercial convenience.

The attempt to genetically engineer trees is part of a long history of trying to convert diverse ecosystems into single-use production plants. With the Green Revolution introduced in the 50's which implied the industrialisation and "commodisation" of agriculture, the sound paradigm of diverse forest management has been increasingly replaced by a pattern which offers no space for forest uses other than wood fibre extraction, the utmost expression of it being large scale monoculture tree plantations.

In a step forward, industries together with some governmental authorities and universities have teamed up to make genetically engineered tree plantations a reality. Even though they claim to assess possible environmental impacts, field trials of GE trees are springing up all over the world. These trials are not contained and the impact they have on the environment is unpredictable. The first transgenic species that will be used commercially in plantations are: poplar, pine and eucalyptus. The threats of genetically engineered trees include the loss of millions of acres of native forests, disruptions of insect, bird and wildlife populations, contamination of water and soil, and increased use of herbicides and pesticides. GE trees will also lead to the inevitable and irreversible contamination of native forests with genetically engineered pollen in a perpetual domino effect.

From the academic community and the civil society many have voiced strong opposition to this trend. A campaign on genetically engineered trees has been going on since March 2000, organised by Action for Social & Ecological Justice (formerly Native Forest Network's Eastern North American Resource Center) and founding member of the Global Alliance Against Genetically Engineered Trees (GAAGET). Beginning in the fall of 2002, ASEJ held regional strategy sessions in the four regions of the United States most heavily involved in genetically engineered tree research and development. A national strategy session followed where participated groups like Rainforest Action Network, the Dogwood Alliance and Forest Ethics. The purpose of this campaign is to achieve an international ban on the release of genetically engineered trees into the environment including test sites and commercial applications.

And now, there is some good news. Kinkos, the photocopy giant, announced that it would not align itself with suppliers using genetically engineered trees. This policy is the first of its kind regarding genetically engineered trees and is a groundbreaking step toward the elimination of the severe ecological threats posed by genetically engineered trees.

"We laud this decision by Kinkos and congratulate Rainforest Action Network and the Dogwood Alliance on this important victory," said Brad Hash, Campaigner on Genetically Engineered Trees for Action for Social & Ecological Justice, who is confident that this is the beginning of a ripple effect that will be contagious throughout the industry. Action for Social & Ecological Justice will publicly announce its corporate target during the Latin American Solidarity Coalition Conference in Washington, DC during the second week of April. The LASC conference was chosen as the

launching point due to the impending threats GE trees pose to Latin American forests and indigenous peoples. The campaign will include national days of action at key locations across the US.

Article based on information from: "Kinkos Policy Major Step Toward GE Tree Eradication", ASEJ Press Release, March 13, 2003, sent by Elizabeth Bravo, Acción Ecológica, e-mail: ebravo@accionecologica.org; "ASEJ's Campaign Against Genetically Engineered Trees", Action for Social and Ecological Justice, e-mail: info@asej.org , http://www.asej.org/getrees.html , "GE Trees", Global Alliance Against GE Trees, email: gaaget@gaaget.org ; http://www.gaaget.org