
Hawaii: Planned invasion of genetically manipulated trees

Genetically modified crops have been hogging the limelight of public opinion due to the controversy arising on their unpredictable consequences on health and the environment. Nevertheless, the genetic engineering of trees has been largely in the shadows. In the meantime, joint ventures of giant corporations were created to carry out research in the tree biotechnology field. This "development" means but the intensification of the prevailing industrial plantation forestry model, which has proved to have negative environmental and social impacts, and which is consequently being resisted worldwide by affected local communities.

One example of such joint ventures is ForBio, a company founded in 1992 and based in Brisbane, Australia, which is developing techniques for "mapping" trees' DNA, which can allow to identify which genes are controlling performance, with the aim of shortening the growing time periods. "We're looking at changing the whole economics of plantation crops", expressed Bill Henderson, the company's cofounder and chief executive.

ForBio formed a joint-venture with Monsanto to conduct field trials in Indonesia. In May 1998 the venture planted more than 50 different clones of a eucalyptus hybrid, which were able to grow so quickly that it was expected they would ready for harvesting for wood chips in only four to five years. Given the complete disregard of the Indonesian authorities with respect to the negative impacts of tree monocultures in general and of genetically-engineered trees in particular, this country seemed to be the ideal place to begin operations.

However, Indonesia's financial crisis hit the company's plans and now its new objective is the breeding of transgenic eucalyptus in Hawaii. In the past years about 200,000 hectares formerly occupied by sugar cane plantations were abandoned in Hawaii. Thus, the local conditions -existing infrastructure, available lands, soil, and climate- seemed perfect to the company which -as usual in these cases- assured that their plantations would again create the jobs lost by the disappearance of sugar cane plantations.

The future is however uncertain. The company is probably unaware that in 1997, Friends of Hamakua -a local Hawaiian NGO- together with local farmers and community organizations successfully managed to prevent the implementation of a large eucalyptus plantation and a pulp mill in the Big Island (see WRM Bulletins 3 and 7). If "normal" eucalyptus monocultures generated such opposition, what will the reaction of local people be to the invasion of their lands to these genetically-manipulated trees?

Source: Patrick Reinsborough; 19/1/2000