Large Alliance of NGOs and Indigenous Peoples Calls for Ban on Genetically Modified Trees for Biofuels

Paris, France, July 4th 2007 -- Over 50 Indigenous Peoples Organizations and Non-Governmental Organizations involved in meetings surrounding the Convention on Biological Diversity, presented an open letter today recommending a ban on Genetically Modified trees on the basis of their potential impacts on forest biological diversity. They expressed their concern that the current biofuels boom and the rush for so-called second generation biofuels will lead to dangerous experiments with these trees.

The document was presented to delegates attending the Subsidiary Body on Scientific, Technical and Technological Advice (SBSTTA). SBSTTA is a subsidiary body of the Conference of the Parties (COP) of the Convention on Biological Diversity, and advises the CBD on scientific and technical issues.

The letter, which was circulated by World Rainforest Movement, Global Justice Ecology Project and Global Forest Coalition, insisted on compliance by all countries with the precautionary approach in regard to GM trees, as agreed upon at the CBD's 8th Conference of the Parties last year in Curitiba, Brazil.

Trees are being engineered with unnatural traits such as the ability to kill insects, or have reduced lignin. Lignin is the substance in a tree that makes it strong and protects it from disease, fungus, wind and other environmental stresses. The escape of these traits into forests via seed or pollen threatens to contaminate forests with these traits, which could disrupt forest ecosystems, damage biodiversity and wildlife, as well as potentially harming the health of nearby communities. Trees can spread seeds and pollen for hundreds of kilometers. Ironically, though GE trees threaten to worsen global warming by damaging the ability of natural forests to store carbon, companies propose to develop GE tree plantations as a source for biofuels.

World Rainforest Movement's Ana Filippini said, "Countries are dangerously ignoring the precautionary approach as research in GM trees is currently being carried out in at least the following countries: Australia, Brazil, Canada, Chile, China, Finland, France, Germany, Japan, New Zealand, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, United Kingdom and United States."

"Last week in the U.S., APHIS (the Animal Plant Health Inspection Service), a subsidiary body of the US Department of Agriculture, approved a request by GM tree corporation ArborGen to allow their field trial of genetically modified eucalyptus trees in Alabama to flower and produce seeds," Anne Petermann of Global Justice Ecology Project stated. "Similar permission is being sought for GM tree test plots in Brazil," she added.

"With the current rush for agrofuels, companies and governments are looking to GM trees as potential source for future supplies of cellulosic ethanol", concluded Simone Lovera of Global Forest Coalition. "This will have a devastating impact on forests and forest-dependent peoples all over the world."

According to the Biotechnology and GMOs Information Website http://gmoinfo.jrc.it/gmp_report.aspx?CurNot=B/FR/07/06/01, this month in France, the same country this SBSTTA is being held, the company INRA, will begin a study of transgenic poplar trees for bioethanol production. The five year GM tree experiment will be located at the nursery of the Breeding Experimental Unit on the ground of the INRA-Orleans Centre located in Saint Cyr en Val, in France.

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