



News Release
November 14, 2003
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Terminator Technology Debate Hijacked in Montreal

Terminator – or genetic seed sterilization – has been on the agenda of the United Nations' Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) for five years. If the Gene Giants and governments get their way, the CBD will be conducting studies on Terminator for years to come – long after suicide seeds are commercialized and show up in farmers' fields.

At the ninth meeting of the CBD's scientific advisory body (SBSTTA 9)¹ held November 10-14 in Montreal, four governments – Canada, New Zealand, Argentina and Brazil – were allowed to hijack debate and stall action on Terminator by insisting that the CBD postpone consideration of an expert technical report on the impacts of genetic seed sterilization, arguing that the report lacks scientific rigor.² While the report will be forwarded to next February's Conference of the Parties (COP7) in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, it will go with a recommendation that COP7 forego action and re-direct the report to the next meeting of the scientific body (SBSTTA10) – in late 2004 or 2005 – with the aim of providing advice to COP8 in 2006!

"It's an appalling tactic to delay action against Terminator seeds," said Yoke Ling Chee of the Malaysia-based Third World Network. "The Gene Giants know that CBD has already accepted a weak and partial moratorium on GURTs [the CBD refers to Terminator as GURTs – genetic use restriction technology] and this is an underhanded maneuver to prevent debate from moving forward at COP7."

The move to discredit the Expert Group's report is especially disingenuous because the explicit mandate of the Group was *not* to conduct a scientific assessment of Terminator – which was done several years ago – but to examine the impacts of Terminator on smallholder farmers, indigenous peoples and local communities. Accordingly, the Expert Group included representation from indigenous peoples' and farmers' organizations, as well as civil society, scientists, industry and governments.

"SBSTTA9's decision is wrong and dangerous," said Alejandro Argumedo of the Indigenous Peoples Biodiversity Network. "Giving four governments the right to derail a report on the impact of Terminator on indigenous peoples and local communities is like saying that the voices of these communities are not important, and that the social and economic impacts of Terminator can be dismissed," said Argumedo.

Seed Industry Coup at SBSTTA9: The presence of Monsanto and Delta & Pine Land at SBSTTA9 may very well have something to do with the surprise objection by four governments to the Expert Group's report on Terminator. A Monsanto employee attended SBSTTA9 as the representative of the Biotechnology Industry Organization and Delta & Pine Land's Vice-President for Technology Transfer represented the International Seed Federation. Earlier this year, these industry representatives co-authored a paper defending GURTS and extolling the theoretical virtues of Terminator for small farmers and indigenous peoples.³ Both Monsanto and Delta & Pine Land have vested interests in Terminator technology. (Delta and Pine Land jointly holds three patents on genetic seed sterilization with the US government. Although in 1999 Monsanto's then-CEO publicly pledged not to develop Terminator seeds, there is growing evidence – including the championing of Terminator by one of its employees – that the Gene Giant is changing its tune.)

Sterile Harvest Coming Soon:

“While CBD is chasing paper and conducting endless studies, multinational Gene Giants are winning new patents and planning to field test sterile seed technology soon. If delays such as the one we just saw in Montreal continue, we'll have sterile harvests in farmers' fields within a year or two. If CBD fails to take decisive action to prevent commercialization of Terminator seeds, it will be a profound betrayal of its mandate to protect biodiversity,” said Hope Shand of ETC Group.

The governments gathering in Kuala Lumpur at COP7 need to muster the political will to put an end to delays and to take decisive action to stop Terminator.

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The Action Group on Erosion, Technology and Concentration, formerly RAFI, is an international civil society organization headquartered in Canada. The ETC group is dedicated to the advancement of cultural and ecological diversity and human rights. www.etcgroup.org. The ETC group is also a member of the Community Biodiversity Development and Conservation Programme (CBDC). The CBDC is a collaborative experimental initiative involving civil society organizations and public research institutions in 14 countries. The CBDC is dedicated to the exploration of community-directed programmes to strengthen the conservation and enhancement of agricultural biodiversity. The CBDC website is www.cbdcprogram.org

¹ Subsidiary Body on Scientific, Technical and Technological Advice. For more information on the meeting, see <http://www.biodiv.org/doc/meeting.asp?mtg=SBSTTA-09>

² The “Report of the Ad Hoc Technical Expert Group Meeting on the Potential Impacts of Genetic Use Restriction Technologies on Smallholder Farmers, Indigenous and Local Communities and Farmers' Rights, is available on the Internet: <http://www.biodiv.org/doc/meetings/sbstta/sbstta-09/information/sbstta-09-inf-06-en.pdf>

³ The full text of the paper is available here: http://www.etcgroup.org/documents/collins_kreugerISF.pdf