



RAFI

Rural Advancement Foundation International

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USDA Refuses to Abandon Terminator Technology

Delta & Pine Land Gets One Step Closer to Commercialization

Two days of contentious debate on Terminator has ruptured the US Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Advisory Board on Agricultural Biotechnology. Terminator technology, the genetic engineering of plants to produce sterile seeds, has been widely condemned as a dangerous and morally offensive application of agricultural biotechnology, because over 1.4 billion people depend on farm-saved seeds.

USDA ignited the worldwide controversy in March 1998 when it won the first of three patents on genetic seed sterilization, which it holds jointly with Delta & Pine Land – the world's largest cotton seed company.

At its second meeting, July 26-27, the 38-member advisory board learned that the USDA has decided not to unilaterally terminate its contractual agreement with Delta and Pine Land, despite the fact that they have the legal option to do so. Instead, the Board was given the option of exploring restrictions on the exclusive licensing of its Terminator patents to Delta & Pine Land. In the end, however, all licensing restrictions would have to be mutually agreed upon by both the USDA and Delta & Pine Land.

"Taking this issue to the Advisory Board and calling for public comment on Terminator was a giant charade, and a mockery of the democratic process" concludes Hope Shand, Research Director of RAFI. "Apparently, the USDA had already decided that abandoning the Terminator was not an option."

At the Advisory Board meeting this week, the Agency revealed that an official public comment period on agricultural biotechnology, from March 30-July 21, 2000 yielded 213 comments. Of the comments received, 207 were negative towards biotechnology, and 162 comments called on USDA to ban and abandon its work on Terminator technology. "There is no public support for Terminator, because it's anti-farmer and benefits only the corporate seed industry," concludes Shand.

Despite intense opposition from some members of the Advisory Board, the group discussed one possible caveat to the licensing agreement, though even this condition must first be accepted by the seed enterprise. "Faced with almost total global opposition to Terminator from the United Nations, scores of national governments, scientific institutions, and a commitment by the USDA not to use the technology, the Advisory Board considered a proposal that Delta & Pine Land agree not to apply Terminator to heirloom seeds and existing varieties!" Hope Shand reports. "Delta & Pine Land has no interest in heirloom seeds. By definition, heirloom seeds and existing varieties are not transgenic anyway. Infected with the suicide sequence, any variety becomes "new"! This option is inane and nonsensical."

"USDA obviously favors private gain over the public good and the rights of farmers," said Michael Sligh, a member of the Advisory Board and RAFI-USA's Director of Sustainable Agriculture. "All members of the Advisory Board have 30 days to submit their views in writing, but USDA has already concluded that abandoning the patents and condemning the technology is not an option."

RAFI and its sister organization, RAFI-USA met with Secretary Glickman and/or senior USDA officials several times in the past year. At every meeting, the officials expressed embarrassment about the technology and vowed that the USDA would not support further Terminator research nor permit its use in breeding programs for public release. "We advised them to abandon the patents and to adopt a policy prohibiting public funding of genetic seed sterilization," Michael Sligh recalls, "Their response was always that they wanted to use the deal as 'leverage' on the company to protect the public interest."

"Secretary Glickman needs to tell the world why this deal is being cut," asserts Julie Delahanty of RAFI. "During the UN Biodiversity Convention meetings in Nairobi in May, the delegates agreed to a moratorium on all field testing and commercialization of Terminator and other similar technologies. Many countries requested an outright ban on Terminator, and others expressed the concern that Terminator could be used as a trade weapon to force them to obey US trade and patent laws. Some countries even see Terminator as a form of biological warfare since poor farmers could become dependent on seeds that they are prohibited from saving. To date, nobody in the Administration has offered a convincing excuse for giving the technology the go-ahead," concludes Delahanty.

Secretary of Agriculture Dan Glickman took the helm of USDA in March, 1995. During his watch USDA's Agricultural Research Service applied for and received three Terminator patents with Delta & Pine Land. "Terminator is a bitter biotech legacy to leave to the world's farmers," notes Shand, "and that's how Glickman's USDA will be remembered, unless the Agency reforms its pro-Terminator policy."

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RAFI-USA is a private, non-profit organization based in Pittsboro, NC dedicated to community, equity and diversity in agriculture.

RAFI (The Rural Advancement Foundation International) is an international civil society organization based in Canada. RAFI is dedicated to the conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity, and to the socially responsible development of technologies useful to rural societies. RAFI is concerned about the loss of agricultural biodiversity, and the impact of intellectual property on farmers and food security.

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