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News Release –October 29 1999

USDA Must Abandon Terminator Technology

Representatives from civil society organizations (CSOs) met yesterday with U.S. Secretary of Agriculture Dan Glickman to demand that his agency abandon research and development of the controversial Terminator technology. Participants included the American Corn Growers Association, Consumers Union, National Family Farm Coalition, Ralph Nader, International Center for Technology Assessment, Mothers and Others for a Livable Planet, Consumer Federation, Sustainable Agriculture Coalition, North Dakota farmer Fred Kirschenmann, and RAFI. Terminator refers to a genetic engineering technique that renders second generation seed sterile, preventing farmers from saving seed from their harvest, and forcing them to buy new seed each year.

"It's disgraceful that the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) continues to support and defend Terminator," said Hope Shand, Research Director of RAFI, at a press conference preceding the USDA meeting. "All over the world, farmers, governments, scientists, and CSOs have condemned the technology. Even Monsanto has pulled the plug on Terminator. Why is USDA ignoring the public outcry against suicide seeds?" asked Shand. At yesterday's meeting, Secretary Glickman did not reveal any new information about the USDA's position on Terminator or biotechnology, but said that he would be personally involved in reviewing the situation. "We anxiously await a response and positive action from Mr. Glickman," said RAFI's Shand.

The USDA is co-owner of a U.S. patent (5,723,765) on genetic seed sterilization, the product of collaborative research with Delta & Pine Land, a Mississippi-based seed company which is in the process of being acquired by Monsanto. USDA is currently negotiating to license its patent to Delta & Pine Land - a requirement of its collaborative research agreement. In addition to in-house research, USDA has supported research on suicide seeds at Purdue University (Indiana, USA).

Responding to widespread public opposition, the Monsanto Corporation announced earlier this month that it would not commercialize Terminator seeds. Monsanto joins other public and private institutions such as UK-based AstraZeneca and the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research who have publicly rejected genetic seed sterilization.

"Even Monsanto admits that it rejected Terminator because of pressure from its grower constituency," explained Bill Christison, a Missouri farmer who is president of the National Family Farm Coalition. Over the past 18 months, Secretary Glickman has received thousands of letters, phone calls, faxes, and e-mail messages protesting USDA's support of Terminator technology. "Why is USDA blatantly ignoring its farmer constituency?" asks Christison.

"If commercialized, Terminator seeds will hold farmers hostage to giant agribusiness corporations," said Gary Goldberg, CEO of the American Corn Growers Association. "Genetic seed sterility is not about improving crops or increasing production, it's simply about increasing seed industry profits," asserts Goldberg. "Why is USDA supporting anti-farmer research that serves only the interests of agrochemical and seed corporations?" "USDA's support of Terminator technology has eroded public trust and confidence in the agency's commitment to sustainable agriculture," said Margaret Mellon, of the Union of Concerned Scientists. "USDA can restore public confidence by abandoning the goal of genetic seed sterilization and by making a strong commitment to public plant breeding for sustainable agriculture," adds Mellon.

Adam Goldberg of the Consumers Union agrees, "Research on Terminator technology is a misallocation of precious USDA research dollars, and will benefit only a handful of big corporations. This money would be far better spent on sustainable agriculture and integrated pest management, which will benefit everyone," said Goldberg.

"The specter of genetic seed sterilization is particularly alarming given the rapid rate of consolidation in the global seed industry," added RAFI's Shand. The top 10 seed companies control approximately one-third of the global seed market. "If a handful of companies control global seed markets, will farmers have a choice whether or not to buy Terminator seeds?"

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The diverse farm, consumer and advocacy organizations who met with U.S. Secretary of Agriculture Glickman made the following policy recommendations:

1. All seed and agrochemical corporations should make the same pledge that Monsanto made earlier this month. DuPont, Novartis, Aventis, and others should make a public commitment not to commercialize Terminator seed technology as well as the closely related genetic trait control technologies. The so-called "genetic use restriction technology" will allow a plant's genetic traits to be turned on or off with the application of an external chemical inducer - likely to be the company's proprietary chemical. Remote control of a plant's genetic traits, triggered by proprietary chemicals, is grim news for farmers and the environment because, if commercialized, farmers would become more dependent on chemical inputs manufactured by the seed industry.

2. USDA should cease negotiations with Delta & Pine Land on the licensing of it's jointly held patent, U.S. patent number 5,723,765, and abandon all research on genetic seed sterilization, including research grants to university scientists.

3. USDA should adopt a strict policy prohibiting the use of taxpayer dollars to support genetic seed sterilization.

4. USDA should use public research dollars to re-invigorate public plant breeding for family farmers and sustainable agriculture. Instead of engineering seeds for sterility, USDA should boost breeding programs that will lessen farmers' dependency on chemicals, fertilizers, and other expensive inputs. Given consumer concerns and uncertain markets for genetically engineered seeds, USDA should invest in low-cost alternatives to industry's patented, high-tech seeds. Finally, USDA should insure that farmers and citizens are involved in determining research priorities.

For further information:

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RAFI, the Rural Advancement Foundation International, is an international civil society organization headquartered 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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