



RAFI

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Terminator Terminated?

Monsanto surrenders 'suicide seeds' but continues work on other Traitor Technologies

With biotech's silver bullet firmly imbedded in its own foot, Monsanto is dropping its guns, abandoning the Terminator, and telling farmers that it wants to play nice. Not so fast, hombre!

Following 18 months of controversy and intense popular opposition around the world, Monsanto CEO Robert B. Shapiro has advised Gordon Conway, President of the Rockefeller Foundation, that Monsanto has decided to abandon plans to commercialize Terminator Technology (causing crop seed to become sterile at harvest-time). Monsanto's open letter to Rockefeller is available on the company website at: www.monsanto.com/monsanto/gurt/default.htm However, the company says it will continue to pursue closely related research targets that could allow Monsanto to switch on - or off - other genetic traits vital to a crop's productivity. RAFI calls it "Traitor" technology.

"Congratulations should go to the civil society organizations, farmers, scientists, and governments all over the world who have waged highly effective anti-Terminator campaigns during the past 18 months," said Pat Mooney, Executive Director of RAFI, in reaction to Monsanto's announcement. "The public unanimously rejected Terminator because it's bad for farmers, food security, and the environment," explained Mooney.

"Monsanto would never have abandoned the profit-generating potential of sterile seeds just because it was an immoral technology," said RAFI's Research Director, Hope Shand. "The company finally realized that Terminator will never win public acceptance. Terminator has become synonymous with corporate greed, and it was met with intense opposition all over the world," adds Shand.

Limping from a Silver Bullet: Monsanto is the second major "Gene Giant" to back away from Terminator Technology. In June of this year, the UN Convention on Biological Diversity received a letter from UK-based AstraZeneca announcing that it would not commercialize seed sterility technologies. "In all, more than a dozen companies and public institutes have at least 31 patents that include claims involving seed sterilization," Pat Mooney says. Monsanto was the big gun however, and Terminator became a public relations disaster for the company when it made a bid to acquire Delta & Pine Land Seed Company in May 1998. Delta & Pine Land co-owns the "prototype" Terminator patent with the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) – U.S. patent number 5,723,765. In addition, Monsanto holds a second patent, WO 9744465, published 27 November 1997.

Terminator Turn-Around: Even though RAFI does not question Monsanto's public commitment to abandon Terminator, it notes that market and technical realities may eventually force a different outcome. In a letter dated 24 February 1999 AstraZeneca categorically stated that it abandoned the development of its Terminator-type technology for the purpose of seed sterilization in 1992. RAFI discovered that ExSeed, an AstraZeneca joint venture with Iowa State University, won a new seed sterilization patent on 11 August 1997, based on a claim made in 1995 - three years after AstraZeneca's research was to have been abandoned.

"We can't trust where the technology and companies may be taking us," said Mooney. "The technology for seed sterilization and trait control are on the same trajectory. At some point, either through a corporate take-over or a change in management, trait control could easily be transformed back into genetic seed sterilization," he cautions.

Transnational Trait Control = Bioserfdom: All the Gene Giants are pursuing R&D on Terminator and Traitor technology, warns RAFI. Companies including Monsanto, are working to control important genetic traits of plants with external chemical catalysts. Once perfected, a seed's genetic trait(s) could be turned on or off with the application of a proprietary chemical, such as a herbicide or fertilizer, for example. "The companies tell us that trait control will mean more options for farmers, but chemically-dependent seeds will more likely lead to bioserfdom," warns Hope Shand. RAFI's in-depth report on Traitor technology, and a list of private and public sector institutions who hold Terminator-type patents, is available at: <http://www.rafi.org>

USDA Stands Alone: When will USDA follow suit? USDA is now in the shameful position of supporting and defending a genetic technology that the world's 2nd largest seed corporation has clearly rejected due to public opposition. At a meeting with civil society organizations in June, Under-Secretary of Agriculture Richard Rominger told RAFI that USDA refuses to abandon the patent it co-owns with Delta & Pine Land (a Mississippi-based seed company in the process of being acquired by Monsanto) because it wants to see the technology widely licensed.

Robert Shapiro's letter says that Monsanto made the decision to reject Terminator in part because it was responding to the views of its "very important grower constituency." "Why is USDA ignoring its farm constituency? Why does USDA insist on defending a technology that is bad for farmers, food security, and the environment?" asks RAFI's Hope Shand.

"USDA is increasingly marginalized in its support of Terminator, it should immediately cease negotiations with Delta & Pine Land, abandon the patent, and develop a strict policy prohibiting the use of taxpayer funds for the development of genetic seed sterilization," said Hope Shand.

Governments Need to Pull the Plug on Terminator: "Monsanto has taken a positive step, but let's not forget that farmers can never depend on the charity and goodwill of the Gene Giants to reject immoral technologies," concludes RAFI's Mooney. "Without government action to firmly reject Terminator and Traitor technology, these technologies will be commercialized within a few years with potentially disastrous consequences," cautions Mooney.

RAFI urges national governments to take action at WTO and elsewhere to reject Terminator and Traitor technology on the basis of public morality. Next month, Ministers of Agriculture will gather for a ministerial meeting at the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization in Rome. "It's the perfect opportunity for Ministers to affirm

Monsanto and AstraZeneca's conclusion that Terminator technology is not safe for farmers or food security," concludes Hope Shand.

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RAFI is a non-profit international civil society organization headquartered in Winnipeg, Canada. For more than twenty years, RAFI has worked on the social and economic impact of new technologies as they impact rural societies.

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