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WORLD'S LARGEST INTERNATIONAL AGRICULTURAL RESEARCH NETWORK VOWS NOT TO USE TERMINATOR TECHNOLOGY

It's bad for poor farmers and it's bad for crop biodiversity concludes the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR) meeting in Washington

With more than 70% of the Third World's rice and wheat crops based upon its crop breeding programmes, the world's largest network of agricultural research institutes is vowing not to use Terminator Technology (a biotech-based strategy that prevents seed from regenerating in a second growing season). The decision is a slap-in-the-face to one of its major funders - the US Government, and to Monsanto Corporation - who claim their technology will help feed the hungry.

Proud Policy: RAFI has learned that a special committee of the Consultative Group for International Agricultural Research (CGIAR) has agreed to advise its network of 16 International Agricultural Research Centres to adopt a no-use policy with respect to the Terminator Technology jointly patented by the US Department of Agriculture and a Monsanto subsidiary, Delta and Pine Land Seed Company. The decision, by the Genetic Resources Policy Committee of the CGIAR, will - if custom is maintained - be accepted by the entire network at its annual gathering in Washington October 26-30. This is the first time, to RAFI's knowledge, that the CGIAR - with an annual budget of about US\$325 million in 1998, has taken such a controversial policy position and directly challenged the CGIAR's biggest long-term donor - the US Government.

1850 Letters: "It's the right decision and it is also a courageous decision," says RAFI director, Pat Roy Mooney. "Since the patent was granted in the United States last March, it has attracted unprecedented opposition from farmers' organizations, environmentalists, and agricultural scientists. More than 1850 individuals from 54 countries have written personal protests to the US Secretary of Agriculture demanding that the technology be banned," Mooney adds.

Risky Business: The CGIAR's policy committee, chaired by World Food Prize winner, M.S. Swaminathan of India, began studying the Terminator at RAFI's request last April. The policy committee agreed to call for a network-wide ban on the use of the technology when it met in Washington Tuesday this week. Government delegations arriving in Washington for next week's formal meetings learned of the decision as they arrived at their hotels.

Voices for the Poor: "RAFI doesn't have direct access to the final resolution," Pat Mooney reports, "but several delegates confirm that the ban was accepted because the Terminator threatens the well-being of 1.4 billion poor people who, according to FAO statistics, depend upon farm saved-seed for their food security. Many also opposed the Terminator because of its direct and indirect threat to crop genetic diversity. By rendering the harvested seed sterile, the Terminator puts a chilling end to 12 thousand years of farm seed conservation and community plant breeding." According to RAFI's sources, opposition to the Terminator was strongest from CIMMYT (the International Maize and Wheat Improvement Centre near Mexico City), IPGRI (the International Plant Genetic Resources Institute in Rome) and from the committee's Chair, M.S. Swaminathan.

Third World Target: "This is a serious blow to Monsanto and to the US Government," Pat Mooney asserts, "Both parties have argued that the Terminator was designed with Third World farmers in mind. They have also specifically identified crops like wheat and rice in countries such as India, China and Pakistan. The inventors claim that Terminator will give companies with proprietary genetic traits confidence to risk selling their seeds abroad. Since farmers can't save the seeds, they are forced back to the marketplace to buy seed every season. Patented genes can't be bred into other varieties by poor farmers. Traditionally," Mooney explains, "women farmers not only save seed but they use purchased seed to cross with other breeding stock to improve and adapt the seed to their local needs. The Terminator makes all this impossible."

Growing Opposition: For these reasons, the Government of India has announced that it won't allow Terminator technology into the country. The Terminator has also been banned in at least one Brazilian state and the technology is the subject of active debate in the Irish Parliament. "The Terminator patent is pending in 87 countries, RAFI believes that many of these countries will block the patent on the grounds that it is contrary to public morality. The decision by the CGIAR will accelerate opposition around the world. "The CGIAR's members have just cause to be proud of their stance on the side of poor farmers," Pat Mooney concludes.