

Ban Terminator Campaign
www.banterminator.org
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The Battle in Brazil: Lines Drawn in Terminator Seed Fight

As 188 national governments gather in Curitiba, Brazil, for the Eighth Conference of the Parties (COP8) to the United Nations' Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), battle lines are being drawn on the issue of Terminator technology – crops genetically modified to produce sterile seeds, also known as “suicide seeds.” Almost 500 organisations – including farmer organizations and peasant movements, international civil society organizations, trade unions, faith organizations and churches – have now called on the world's governments to enact a ban on Terminator at the upcoming CBD meeting. (The complete list of organizations supporting a ban on Terminator is posted at www.banterminator.org/endorsements.)

Thousands of farmers organized through Via Campesina, the international peasant movement representing millions of farmers worldwide, have announced that they will demonstrate against Terminator outside the CBD conference centre. Working with other social movements as part of the Forum of Brazilian NGOs (FBOMS), Via Campesina will hold public events and rallies throughout COP8, including a day of opposition to Terminator on March 21st. To mark International Women's Day (March 8th), Pakistani women farmers met near Islamabad and vowed to resist any moves to introduce Terminator technology into their country. Last week in Porto Alegre, at the International Conference on Agrarian Reform and Rural Development organized by the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations, Rafael Alegria from Via Campesina received a standing ovation for his speech against Terminator. The parallel Forum for Land, Territory and Dignity also expressed its strong rejection of Terminator Technology.

From Australia and New Zealand to Spain, Germany, the UK and Canada, letter-writing campaigns are underway. Many thousands of citizens have asked their national delegations to support a ban on Terminator at the CBD, including 50,000 Canadians who have sent “Ban Terminator” protest cards to Prime Minister Stephen Harper. In India nearly 500,000 signatures supporting the Terminator moratorium have been collected. In Italy, more than 120 scientists have signed an anti-Terminator petition sent to the Minister of Agriculture. In Canada, there have been protests in Montreal, home of the CBD secretariat. A public “Terminator on Trial” event is scheduled for the evening of 20th March in Canada's capital city. National radio journalist Bob Carty will host the event in Ottawa and there will be a live video link to the CBD meeting in Curitiba. The “trial” will feature “testimony” from Indian scientist and activist Vandana Shiva and farmer Percy Schmeiser (famously sued by Monsanto for planting saved seed). Organizers expect hundreds to attend the trial acting as a people's jury.

In light of the vigorous and worldwide opposition to Terminator, even the world's three largest seed companies – Monsanto, Pioneer Hi-Bred (DuPont) and Syngenta – have now publicly distanced themselves from suicide seeds. ¹ However, it seems that a handful of governments from wealthy countries have come to Curitiba intending to press ahead with attempts to undermine the existing, six-year old global moratorium on Terminator.

At stake is the food security and livelihoods of 1.4 billion people who depend on farmer-saved seed.

In 2000, governments at the CBD agreed to a moratorium on field trials and commercial release of Terminator technology. Terminator is a type of genetically engineered technology called Genetic Use Restriction Technologies (or GURTs) at the UN. Six years later, governments from Africa, Asia and Latin America continue to support the moratorium, but Australia, New Zealand and Canada have attempted in recent years to introduce new wording into the text of the Convention that undermines the moratorium. These three countries appear to be doing the bidding of the US government, which is not a party to the CBD. The US would like Terminator to be regulated under national laws rather than internationally at the CBD. The pro-Terminator governments are pushing for “case by case risk assessment” of GURTs with the intention of allowing Terminator to be approved through existing legislation for genetically modified crops, without consideration for social and economic impacts. The “Terminator Trio” – Australia, New Zealand and Canada – have now been joined by a fourth: the UK government.

The interest in promoting Terminator on the part of a handful of wealthy governments is not hard to understand. The commercial seed market worldwide brings in approximately US\$23 billion in revenue annually, but trade sources estimate that if farmers could not save seed and were forced to buy new seed at each planting, the global seed market would increase beyond \$45 billion. The international civil society organization ETC Group estimates that at least US\$10 billion of the seed market increase would come from South farmers. Brazilian soybean farmers who are now using farm-saved seed would see their seed costs increase by approximately \$515 million each year. Argentina’s soybean farmers would pay an extra US\$276 million. Wheat farmers in Pakistan would face a price rise of US\$191 million, while cotton farmers in that country would pay out an additional US\$33 million. Rice farmers in the Philippines will pay another US\$172 million. Farmers in the North will also suffer. Terminator wheat, alone, will conservatively cost Canadian farmers an additional US\$85 million dollars per year.

GURTS: (some) Governments Urging Release of Terminator Seeds

What follows is more information on the four pro-Terminator governments’ positions in the days leading up to the Battle in Brazil.

Canada – in deaf mode

Opposition to Terminator is strong among Canada's farm organizations.. No major farm organisation in Canada currently supports Terminator. The Union des producteurs agricoles (UPA), representing 44,000 Québec farmers and the National Farmers Union, as well as Canadian Organic Growers are opposed to Terminator. Last week, the 200,000-member Canadian Federation of Agriculture passed a critical resolution requesting an assessment of Terminator’s impacts on farmers. But it doesn’t appear that the Canadian government is listening. Canada first attempted to overturn the CBD moratorium on Terminator in February 2005 at a UN meeting in Bangkok. Referring to Canada’s position, Giuliano Tulusso of Agriculture Canada admitted, “We haven’t necessarily actively consulted farmers.”² In fact, it’s difficult to know whom the Canadian Government has consulted. The 90 or so organizations of the Canadian Council for International Co-operation have asked that the moratorium on Terminator be strengthened and have received no reply from the Canadian government; neither have churches such as the United Church of Canada. Despite Terminator’s unpopularity among Canada’s farmers and public, Agriculture Canada still feels that Canada should support Terminator at the CBD: “There’s always a risk with any technology,” explains Giuliano Tulusso. “The brakes on your car are not 100 per-cent effective either. They can fail.”³

Australia – in the dark?

The Australian government led the most recent attempt to undermine the *de facto* moratorium on Terminator at a CBD meeting in Granada in January. With an official from the US State Department

by her side during key negotiations, Australian delegate Susan Jones insisted on a “case by case risk assessment” of GURTs. When civil society representatives recently met with the office of Australia’s agriculture minister, officials seemed genuinely surprised by the Australian delegation’s behaviour in Granada, indicating that Australia doesn’t have a formal policy on the GURTs issue.

New Zealand – in denial?

Documents obtained by the Sustainability Council of New Zealand under New Zealand’s Official Information Act show that New Zealand has supported field trials and “case by case assessment” of Terminator since February 2005 and that representatives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade have been actively involved in lobbying at the CBD to undermine the moratorium. Inexplicably, the Minister of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Winston Peters, appeared oblivious to the issue and even denied the existence of the Convention on Biological Diversity. In two days of parliamentary exchanges with MP Nandor Tanczos concerning New Zealand’s position on Terminator, Minister Peters repeatedly asserted, “There is no such international convention or treaty.” When treaty text and a list of the signatories to the CBD was tabled, he responded saying, “I seek leave to table a paper from the convention in respect of Terminator technology, but I cannot, because there is no such convention.” The New Zealand public appears better informed, with thousands of New Zealanders sending email messages to the government asking for a ban on Terminator.

UK – in on the act?

While the UK has previously supported the CBD *de facto* moratorium on Terminator as part of the EU, Prime Minister Tony Blair is known to be close to the biotech industry and, as a result, it seems the UK’s opposition to Terminator is weakening.

UK Environment Ministers have refused to meet with civil society groups, preferring to put civil servants in the firing line. The UK’s Environment Ministry quietly released its own position paper, stating that it will now support “case by case risk assessment” of Terminator (see <http://www.defra.gov.uk/environment/gm/eu/gurts-0602.htm>). This policy is backed by the UK Department for International Development.

Michael Meacher, Labour MP (and UK Environment Minister at the time the UK signed the CBD *de facto* moratorium in 2000), has written to his successor asking that the revised policy be dropped before the meeting in Curitiba. Mr Meacher wrote, “The UK must demonstrate its commitment to global food security and have a strong position at the CBD meeting in March, to ensure that Terminator seeds never see the light of day.”⁴ Nearly 200 cross-party members of the UK parliament have signed a motion calling for the CBD Terminator moratorium to be maintained and there has been a recent debate on the matter in the UK Parliament during which an opposition MP said, “Once the technology is let out of Pandora’s box, there is no putting it back.”⁵

Notes to editors:

The Eighth Meeting of the Conference of the Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity (COP8) begins Monday 20th March 2006 and continues until the following Friday 31st March. The issue of Terminator technology is expected to be addressed during the second and third days of the meeting (Tuesday March 21st and Wednesday March 22nd). The Ban Terminator campaign will provide daily news updates from Curitiba throughout COP8 at www.banterminator.org and, in Portuguese, at www.cop8.org.br. The ETC group will also offer a perspective on events on its web log: www.etcblog.org.

International media seeking updates, interviews or analysis can contact Jim Thomas in Curitiba at jim@etcgroup.org (+55 [41] 88341049; alternate number: +1 613 241-2267). Spanish speakers can contact Verónica Villa at veronica@etcgroup.org. French and Portuguese speakers can contact Karine Peschard at karine@etcgroup.org.

- ¹ The world's three largest seed companies have pledged not to commercialize seed sterilization technologies. Monsanto's pledge is available on its web site at www.monsanto.com/monsanto/content/media/pubs/2005/pledgereport.pdf. The pledge, as it is stated in the Pledge Report, is currently incorrect, according to Monsanto's head of public policy, Diane Herndon. In an email message to the Ban Terminator Campaign dated 27 March 2006, Ms. Herndon clarified that the mention of "non food crops" was a mistake. For more details, see <http://www.etcgroup.org/article.asp?newsid=546>. In an email message to the ETC Group dated 2 March 2006, Tom West, Vice President of Pioneer Hi-Bred International (#2 seed company, owned by DuPont), wrote: "DuPont has not changed our position on this matter. While we continue to work on the use of gene switches in seed products...we have no plans to use biotechnology to interfere with the traditional practice of saving seed by farmers." Syngenta's Lionel Stanbrook of Syngenta International AG (the world's #3 seed company) has also informed The Ban Terminator campaign that it does not intend to commercialize Terminator Technology – referring to a clear position statement on the Syngenta website (available at http://www.syngenta.com/en/about_syngenta/our_views.aspx).
- Only one company publicly vows to commercialize Terminator Technology: Delta and Pine Land (D&PL), the world's 11th largest seed company and joint owner of three US patents on Terminator with the US Department of Agriculture. In 1998, D&PL has said it expected the technology would be used on over one billion acres, especially in countries such as India, Pakistan and China.
- ² Kelly Patterson, "Seeds of discontent: A blessing or a curse to mankind? Critics of genetically modified food and grain-industry giants await UN ruling on 'suicide seeds,'" *The Ottawa Citizen*, Sunday, March 5, 2006.
- ³ Ibid.
- ⁴ Michael Meacher, "Defra is sowing the seeds of poor farmers' destruction," *The Guardian*, March 15, 2006.
- ⁵ To see the full debate's transcript see 8 March 2006, columns 919-925 on <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200506/cmhansrd/cm060308/debindx/60308-x.htm>.