

UN Ban Endures on Terminator Seeds

Posted by

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BROOKLIN, Canada, Feb 11 (**IPS**) - An international moratorium on the use of controversial "terminator technology" in genetically engineered crops survived efforts to overturn it at a United Nations interim meeting on the Convention on Biological Diversity in Bangkok Friday. The Canadian government initiated the move to lift the de-facto moratorium and allow testing and commercialisation of the genetically engineered technology that makes seeds sterile.

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>Subject: [GPC-COUN]: Ban Endures on Terminator Seeds

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>Ban Endures on Terminator Seeds

>Stephen Leahy

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>BROOKLIN, Canada, Feb 11 (IPS) - An international moratorium on the use of
>controversial "terminator technology" in genetically engineered crops
>survived efforts to overturn it at a United Nations interim meeting on the
>Convention on Biological Diversity in Bangkok Friday.

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>The Canadian government initiated the move to lift the de-facto moratorium
>and allow testing and commercialisation of the genetically engineered
>technology that makes seeds sterile.

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>"It was a complete surprise to see this coming from Canada," said Jim
>Thomas of the ETC Group, a Canadian-based NGO.

>

>"Canada's proposal could easily have been mistaken for one written by
>(agribusiness giant) Monsanto," Thomas told IPS from Bangkok.

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>Leaked Canadian government documents obtained by ETC Group state that
>negotiators were instructed to "block consensus" on any other option.

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>However, African countries, Austria, Switzerland, Peru and the Philippines
>strongly objected to Canada's proposal, and on the final day of meetings
>Friday were successful in keeping the moratorium in place, he says.

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>The precautionary moratorium was first instituted at a Convention on
>Biological Diversity (CBD) conference in 1998 over fears about the
>technology's impact on agricultural biodiversity, farmers' ability to save
>seeds, and the risk of "sterilisation genes" ending up in wild plants.

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>"Terminator", a term coined by activists for a specific technology
>developed in the late 1990s and now owned by Monsanto and the U.S.
>government, is just one type of genetic trait control technology. The

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>official CBD term is genetic use restriction technologies (GURTs). Several
>other seed sterilisation or trait controls are in development.

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>"There's no scientific reason why GURTs should be banned before we've been
>able to evaluate them in field trials," says Stephen Yarrow, national
>manager of the Plant Biosafety Office at the Canadian Food Inspection Agency.

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>"The Canadian government supports farmers and seed saving," Yarrow told
>IPS. "However GURTs are a whole class of new technologies that offer a
>number of potential advantages."

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>"We're not pushing this technology. And we're quite upset at being
>characterised (by activists) that way."

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>Others believe that GURTs would be useful in non-food crops that are
>genetically engineered to produce pharmaceutical products to prevent
>formation of seeds.

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>"Used correctly GURTs can be a benefit to society," says Manjit Misra,
>director of the Seed Science Centre at Iowa State University in the United
>States.

>

>The technology could have prevented the ProdiGene incident where an
>unwanted second generation of experimental maize plants containing a
>protein for a pig vaccine grew in a field of soy in the U.S. Midwest. The
>contamination was discovered post-harvest and resulted in about 14 million
>kilogrammes of soybeans being destroyed.

>

>"This technology is also very important for the protection of intellectual
>property," he said. In preventing the re-use of seeds, seed companies can
>get a better return on their research and development costs.

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>"Without intellectual property protection, private companies won't make
>those investments. This is something developing countries don't
>appreciate," he said.

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>There are lots of uses for GURTs and intellectual property protection is
>one of them, agrees Dick Crowder of the American Seed Trade Association.
>Crowder couldn't say what his association's position is on the moratorium.
>However, the U.S. is not a signatory to the CBD.

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>"I'm aware it's a controversial issue," he said.

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>Canada's National Farmer's Union (NFU) was upset to learn that their
>country wanted to overturn the moratorium. In a letter to the country's
>prime minister, they said the terminator technology is "the most

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>controversial and immoral agricultural application of genetic engineering
>to date". They asked Canada to support the moratorium.

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>"We're very concerned. It's just another way to keep farmers from saving
>seed," said Terry Pugh, NFU executive secretary.

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>"It would give seed corporations tremendous amounts of power," he told IPS.

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>Pugh rejects the notion that GURTs could prevent GE pollen and seeds from
>contaminating fields or breeding with wild plants. "First they unleash this
>contamination problem on us and then they say this (GURTs) is the solution?"

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>Compounding the problem is the consolidation within the seed industry.

>Monsanto is buying up all sorts of smaller seed companies, said Pugh,

>citing the 1.4-billion-dollar purchase of Seminis, Inc., a California-based

>seed company in January.

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>As for the future of the CBD moratorium, ETC Group's Thomas says the

>consensus is very fragile. It will be debated at future meetings and there

>is continuing pressure to allow field trials of GURTs and then

>commercialisation.

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>Permanently terminating the terminator technology will be difficult, he said.

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>*Adds response from Canadian government. (END/2005)

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> * < <http://www.etcgroup.org/search.asp?slice=recent&ETC> Group

> * < http://www.etcgroup.org/documents/NR_SBSTTA10.Terminator.pdf&Leaked

>Canadian government document

> * < <http://www.nfu.ca&National> Farmer's Union