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Broken Promise? Monsanto Promotes Terminator Seed Technology

At its annual meeting on Thursday, April 24th, Monsanto's top brass will greet shareholders with a dismal financial report, (a 15% drop in annual sales – \$4.7 billion in 2002, down from \$5.5 billion in 2001) and a shareholder resolution that urges the company to re-think the safety of genetically engineered seeds – now the company's flagship product. But there's potentially more troubling news – a little known position paper that could rattle shareholders, irk investors and erode public confidence still further in the biotech behemoth: Despite its 1999 pledge not to commercialize Terminator technology, Monsanto has recently adopted a *positive* stance on genetic seed sterilization, a technology that has been condemned by civil society and some governments as an immoral application of genetic engineering.

“If Monsanto is reversing its public pledge on Terminator, it will be perceived as a colossal corporate betrayal of the public good – just one more example of corporate greed and fickle governance,” explains Hope Shand, Research Director of ETC Group, “Market confidence in biotech is already low – it could evaporate if Monsanto violates its public pledge on Terminator seeds.” ETC Group, formerly known as RAFI, is one of hundreds of civil society, farmers and indigenous peoples organizations worldwide that has called for a ban on Terminator as an anti-farmer, anti-diversity technology that, if commercialized, would prevent farmers from saving seed from their harvest.

Monsanto's new pro-Terminator position came to public light when the Lyon-based International Seed Federation (ISF) released a position paper on Terminator or GURTs (genetic use restriction technology – the scientific name for Terminator) that defends the potential benefits of genetic seed sterilization and extols the theoretical virtues of Terminator for small farmers and indigenous peoples. Co-authored by Monsanto's Roger Krueger and Harry Collins of Delta & Pine Land (D&PL), the ISF position paper on Terminator was prepared for a February 19-21 meeting of an Expert Panel convened by the United Nations' Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) that met to discuss the implications of Terminator technology for small farmers, indigenous peoples and local communities.

The full text of ISF's position paper on Terminator is available here:
http://www.etcgroup.org/documents/collins_kruegerISF.pdf

Both Krueger and Collins attended the Montreal meeting and served on the Expert Panel. (Harry Collins of D&PL represented the International Seed Federation at the meeting, and Roger Krueger of Monsanto represented the Biotechnology Industry Organization.)

Corporate Amnesia? “It’s not surprising that the International Seed Federation is coming out in favor of a technology that is designed to maximize seed industry profits,” said Jim Thomas, Programme Officer of ETC Group, “but it’s alarming that one of the authors of the paper is an employee of Monsanto – the multinational Gene Giant that, in response to overwhelming public opposition, pledged in 1999 not to develop genetic seed sterilization.”

In October 1999, Gordon Conway, President of the Rockefeller Foundation addressed the Monsanto Board of Directors and urged them to abandon pursuit of Terminator seeds. Then-Monsanto CEO Robert Shapiro responded in an open letter to Rockefeller, in which the company pledged “not to commercialize gene protection systems that render seed sterile.”¹ Since Monsanto made that pledge, the company was acquired by pharma giant Pharmacia, and then spun-off again as a separate company. Shapiro is long gone, Monsanto’s new CEO resigned in December 2002, and there appears to be a total loss of corporate memory on Terminator.

The ETC Group has learned that there were dissenting views amongst the Gene Giants regarding the pro-Terminator position taken by the seed industry trade group. Apparently some of the Gene Giants thought that the pro-Terminator paper, “The Benefits of GURTs,” was too risky – but the pro-Terminator faction won the day. The International Seed Federation’s final position paper is unmistakably pro-Terminator:

“The International Seed Federation (ISF) believes that GURTs have the potential to benefit farmers and others in all size, economic and geographical areas...In reality, the potential effects of the GURTs may be beneficial to small farmers and quite positive for the environment and biodiversity.”²

“It is the strong belief and position of the ISF that GURTs would potentially provide more choice, to the farmers, rather than less choice.”³

Silvia Ribeiro responds to the ISF position, “It’s difficult to understand how Terminator could offer more choice to farmers, especially given the fact that Monsanto’s genetically engineered seeds already account over 90% of all biotech seeds planted worldwide. That’s not more choice, that’s oligopoly!”

Testing the Waters? Now that Monsanto is publicly spearheading the seed industry’s pro-Terminator campaign, will it resurrect a program to develop Terminator seeds? Or is Monsanto simply hoping to pave the way for other companies to take the first step in commercializing the controversial, anti-farmer technology? D&PL, the company that co-authored the ISF paper with Monsanto, has publicly vowed to commercialize Terminator technology, and jointly owns three Terminator patents with the US Department of Agriculture. Is Monsanto testing the waters for a future acquisition of Delta & Pine Land? The first attempt was botched at the end of 1998, when Monsanto pulled out of its announced merger deal with D&PL, in large part due to the Terminator seed controversy.

Biotech’s Trojan Seeds: The Gene Giants are hoping that public opinion has softened because of a campaign to “greenwash” Terminator as a biosafety tool. They are eagerly

endorsing Terminator as a technology that will contain gene flow from GM plants. According to the ISF paper:

“It is believed that in the improbable event of transgenes in GURT crop plants escaping, through pollen, to related wild species, the resulting seed from these pollinations will not express the new trait or will be unable to form a viable seed, thus preventing the possibility of undesirable gene flow.”⁴

“If Terminator is commercialized under the guise of biosafety, we know that it will be incorporated in all genetically engineered seeds,” explains Silvia Ribeiro of ETC Group, “Seed sterility is the ultimate monopoly-maker. With sterile seeds, the Gene Giants have limitless control over plant germplasm, with no expiration date, without patents or lawyers.”

Ultimately, Monsanto’s position on Terminator is of paramount importance to world food security, particularly for over 1.4 billion people who depend on farm-saved seed. In 2002, Monsanto’s genetically engineered seed traits were grown on 56 million hectares (138.3 million acres) worldwide.⁵

Mayday for Monsanto? With Monsanto’s annual meeting taking place on April 24th, shareholders should demand corporate accountability for Monsanto’s public promises. Where does Monsanto really stand on Terminator? Will Monsanto’s shareholders get the straight story on the company’s position? Following a frosty reception in the heartland of the US for Monsanto’s genetically engineered wheat, and a tough-sell for GM seeds worldwide, Terminator could be the seed that breaks the Mammoth’s back.

For more information:

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The Action Group on Erosion, Technology and Concentration, formerly RAFI, is an international civil society organization headquartered in Canada. The ETC group is dedicated to the advancement of cultural and ecological diversity and human rights. www.etcgroup.org. The ETC group is also a member of the Community Biodiversity Development and Conservation Programme (CBDC). The CBDC is a collaborative experimental initiative involving civil society organizations and public research institutions in 14 countries. The CBDC is dedicated to the exploration of community-directed programmes to strengthen the conservation and enhancement of agricultural biodiversity. The CBDC website is www.cbdcprogram.org.

¹ Monsanto's open letter to Rockefeller is available at: http://www.biotech-info.net/monsanto_letter.pdf (We were not able to locate the open letter on Monsanto’s web site.)

² Harry B. Collins and Roger W. Krueger, “Potential Impact of GURTs on Smallholder Farmers, Indigenous & Local Communities and Farmers Rights: The Benefits of GURTs,” p. 1. Paper made available to the CBD’s Ad Hoc Technical Expert Group on the Impact of GURTs on Smallholder Farmers, Indigenous People and Local Communities, February 19-21, 2003. The paper is presented as the official position paper of the International Seed Federation.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 3-4.

⁵ Monsanto web site: http://media.corporate-ir.net/media_files/NYS/MON/reports/4Q02Acreage.pdf