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Suicide Seeds on the Fast Track

While UN Agencies and Governments protest, and Gene Giants morph and maneuver, work on Terminator and Traitor Technologies goes full speed ahead. Genetic trait control technology is already being tested in the field. Can commercialization be far behind?

“We’ve continued right on with work on the Technology Protection System [Terminator]. We never really slowed down. We’re on target, moving ahead to commercialize it. We never really backed off.” - Harry Collins, Delta & Pine Land Seed Co., January, 2000¹

A report released today by the Rural Advancement Foundation International (RAFI) reveals that Terminator and Traitor technology are riding a fast track to commercialization. Entitled “Suicide Seeds on the Fast Track,” the new *RAFI Communique* is available on RAFI’s website:
<http://www.rafi.org>

Terminator technology, the genetic engineering of plants to produce sterile seeds, is universally considered the most morally offensive application of agricultural biotechnology, because over 1.4 billion people depend on farm-saved seeds. Traitor technology, also known as genetic use restriction technology (GURTs), refers to the use of an external chemical to switch on or off a plant’s genetic traits.

“After Monsanto and AstraZeneca publicly vowed not to commercialize suicide seeds in 1999, governments and civil society organizations were lulled into thinking that the crisis had passed. Nothing could be further from the truth,” said RAFI’s Executive Director Pat Mooney. “Despite mounting opposition from national governments and United Nations’ agencies, research on Terminator and Traitor (genetic trait control) is moving full speed ahead,” adds Mooney.

“Delta & Pine Land, the world’s largest cotton seed company, hasn’t skipped a beat – the company is moving aggressively to commercialize Terminator,” said Hope Shand, RAFI’s Research Director. “And despite massive protests, the US Department of Agriculture supports and defends its anti-farmer patent and research on suicide seeds. Last year, AstraZeneca conducted field trials on genetic trait control technology (Traitor technology) in the UK. According to industry sources, it is not the first company to conduct field tests of this kind. Can commercialization of Terminator/Traitor technology be far behind?” asks Shand.

RAFI’s report concludes that corporate commitments to disavow Terminator are virtually meaningless in light of the eye-popping pace of corporate takeovers. Monsanto and AstraZeneca have each merged with other companies since they pledged not to commercialize suicide seeds.

- ◆ On December 2, 1999 Novartis and AstraZeneca announced they would spin-off and merge their agrochemical and seed divisions to create the world’s biggest agribusiness corporation – to be named “Syngenta.”

¹ Collins is quoted in the *Agra/Industrial Biotechnology Legal Letter*, January 2000, p. 4.

- ◆ On December 19, 1999 Monsanto announced that it will merge with drug industry giant Pharmacia & Upjohn to create a new company, named Pharmacia, with combined annual sales of \$17 billion.

Who Has the Guts to Fight GURTs?

The Director General of the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) Jacques Diouf recently declared his opposition to Terminator. In publicly rejecting Terminator, FAO's Diouf has come to the defense of the 1.4 billion people who depend upon farm-saved seed for their survival.

Among the national governments that have announced their intention to oppose Terminator technology are Panama, India, Ghana, and Uganda. India, one of the first governments to publicly reject Terminator, explicitly prohibits Terminator genes in a draft bill now before the Indian Parliament. Ghanaian Minister of Environment, Cletus Avoka, says that his government will not tolerate the use of Terminator technology. Panama's Minister of Agriculture and Fisheries writes that his government "will adopt measures to prohibit the specific patents as well as the technology in general." Ugandan officials have said that their government is discussing measures to outlaw Terminator at the highest levels of government.

"We can't depend on the good will of corporations to prevent Terminator seeds from becoming a commercial reality," says RAFI's Silvia Ribeiro. "Without government action to ban Terminator and Traitor, these technologies will be commercialized, with disastrous consequences for farmers, food security and biodiversity," adds Ribeiro.

Terminator and Traitor technologies are not limited to a single patent, nor is the research confined to one or two companies. Delta & Pine Land is currently the high-profile crusader for Terminator, but the goal of genetic trait control is industry-wide. According to RAFI, over 30 patents are collectively held by the Gene Giants – the multinational agrochemical firms that dominate the field of biotechnology.

According to RAFI, the future of Terminator/Traitor Technology rests with national governments and multinational corporations. The pressure points for political action are, first and foremost, with national governments around the world. Second, pressure should be applied at key international fora such as through the BioSafety Protocol at the Convention on Biological Diversity, and intellectual property negotiations at the World Trade Organization. The frightening specter of "agroterrorism" makes the issue of genetic trait control a critical issue for negotiators in Geneva who are working to strengthen the 1972 Convention on Biological and Toxin Weapons. If political initiatives can be taken in these fora – as well as at the FAO and at the upcoming Global Forum on Agricultural Research in Dresden (May 21-23, 2000), both the corporations and the US Government will have to retreat.

For complete details, please visit RAFI's web site: <http://www.rafi.org>

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RAFI (The Rural Advancement Foundation International) is an international civil society organization based in Canada. RAFI is dedicated to the conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity, and to the socially responsible development of technologies useful to rural societies. RAFI is concerned about the loss of agricultural biodiversity, and the impact of intellectual property on farmers and food security.

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