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For immediate release

Call for “Seed Sovereignty” ban on Terminator patents

Letters to 140 national governments call for direct action as campaign to ban Terminator Technology enters new phase. Are patent-holders waving a white flag?

Launching a new phase in the campaign to ‘Terminate Terminator (seed sterilization) Technology’, RAFI is sending personal letters to more than 550 ministers and senior officials responsible for agriculture, environment, and patent offices in 140 countries. The letters ask cabinet officers to assert national sovereignty over their seed supply and to ban the seed sterilization technology outright. The letters also ask ministers to reject each individual Terminator-type patent pending within their jurisdiction. Ministers are receiving a status report on key Terminator patents in their countries. “Many governments are unaware that the World Trade Organization allows countries to reject individual patents on the grounds that they are contrary to *ordre public* (public morality and/or a threat to health or the environment),” Pat Mooney, RAFI’s Executive Director says, “The WTO also allows governments to ban the entire technology. Both steps should be taken.”

Mail Call for Ministers: While letters are going directly to key policy-makers, RAFI is also posting the country-specific status reports on its website (www.rafi.org). “We’re encouraging citizens to write directly to their President or Prime Minister,” says RAFI’s Edward Hammond, “Close to 7500 letters from 71 countries have been sent to the US Secretary of Agriculture protesting the Terminator. People need to encourage their own governments to act.” RAFI’s website has an on-line question-and-answer brochure on Terminator. Citizens can review sample letters sent to ministers in English, French, and Spanish and use the letter as the basis for writing directly to their own Head of Government.

Terminator Troubles: Opposition to the Terminator is nearing a critical mass. Maurice Strong, Secretary-General of the 1992 Rio Earth Summit, has stated that, “If the owners of technology, such as big companies, used it to victimize people through methods such as promotion of ‘terminator genes’, the state should intervene and not leave the task to the market mechanism.” Strong’s sentiments seem to parallel those of M.S.

Swaminathan, recipient of the prestigious World Food Prize, and past Chair of the UN Food and Agriculture Organization. Last October, Swaminathan told the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR) that the technology threatened agricultural biodiversity and the food security of the poor. Subsequently, the CGIAR – the world’s largest agricultural research network for developing countries, adopted a policy not to use the Terminator in their varieties. The Government of India has already announced that it will ban the technology and similar steps are being taken by the Brazilian state of Rio Grande de Sul and the State of New Hampshire in the USA. A scientific panel established by the UN Convention on Biological Diversity has just tabled its report on the Terminator. The report, which will be discussed in Montreal June 21-25 is predictably mealy-mouthed but the panel’s chair, Dr. Richard Jefferson, was harshly critical of the technology’s use in seed sterilization when he met with governments in Rome in April.

Corporate Colds? Terminator’s patent-holders are now signaling that they might abandon the technology or agree to a moratorium and public dialogue before they decide to commercialize it. AstraZeneca (the Swedish-British merger of Astra pharmaceuticals and Zeneca biosciences) is hinting that it will not use the technology to stop farmers from replanting seed. The Dutch biotech institute at Wageningen University – also the holder of a Terminator patent – has announced that it has no intention of releasing Terminator seeds to farmers. Meanwhile, the US Department of Agriculture, which shares the original Terminator patent with Monsanto, has stated that it will not use the sterility technique in its own varietal releases. In April, Monsanto said that it wants an independent international evaluation of the technology’s implications. A senior Monsanto official told Pat Mooney of RAFI that he would be happy if a UN body undertook an all-stakeholders’ process that, he surmised, might take two years to complete.

False Fronts? Yet, even as AstraZeneca was suggesting that it wouldn’t prevent farmers from saving seed, Edward Hammond discovered Terminator-type patent number 30, held by an AstraZeneca joint venture enterprise with Iowa State University. There is also a cloud of uncertainty surrounding Monsanto’s peace offering... “Monsanto seems to be calling for a *de facto* moratorium and for a global dialogue,” says Pat Mooney, “This is commendable. However the company says it is working with InterAction (a U.S. umbrella group for overseas aid organizations) to develop the process. First, the rest of the world has never heard of InterAction. Second the issue is wider than Monsanto, It involves at least 13 patent-holders in a half-dozen countries. Third, InterAction denies that they have been contacted by Monsanto and agrees that they don’t have the competence to address the issue. Who’s playing what game here?”

International Review: “We don’t need another study of an obviously flawed and immoral technology,,” Hope Shand, RAFI’s Research Director, insists, “we need a review of current private and public agricultural research strategies around the world. We need to understand how priorities are being set. How did so many intelligent scientists come up with such a vicious anti-farmer technology?” Pat Mooney agrees, “The review should be under the auspices of an intergovernmental fora or a well-defined international body like the Global Forum on Agricultural Research sponsored by the World Bank and FAO,” “Meanwhile,” Edward Hammond joins in, “governments should reject all of the Terminator-type patents and declare a national ban on the entire technology.”

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RAFI is a non-profit international civil society organization headquartered in Winnipeg, Canada. For more than twenty years, RAFI has worked on the social and economic impact of new technologies as they impact rural societies.