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Terminating Food Sovereignty in Ecuador? *President opens door to Terminator seeds*

On February 18, 2009, the Ecuadorian Congress approved a new Law on Food Sovereignty, which, among other important points, declared the country “free of transgenic crops and seeds.” However, in spite of vocal popular opposition, the legislation left the door open to approvals of genetically modified organisms (GMOs) in “exceptional” cases. Now, President Rafael Correa has proposed several changes to the legislation – in what is known in Ecuador as a partial-veto – and sent it back to the Congress. The president's changes dangerously weaken the law and open the door to Terminator seeds.

Terminator technology is designed to make “suicide seeds,” genetically engineered to be sterile in the second generation. The technology has been widely rejected around the world by farmers’ movements, governments, research institutions and UN agencies as dangerous, immoral and undesirable.

Alarmed by President Correa's proposals, civil society is now calling on him to drop his amendments and to explicitly ban Terminator technology.

“It's very disturbing that a law that aims to affirm food sovereignty could instead clear the way for a technology that was designed to prevent it,” said Silvia Ribeiro of ETC Group. “The U.S. Department of Agriculture and the companies that designed suicide seed technology did so explicitly to replace what they called peasants’ ‘old seeds.’ Since 2000, when a *de facto* moratorium against Terminator technology was agreed at the UN Convention on Biological Diversity [CBD], these companies have re-branded Terminator as a ‘biosafety’ tool. This is the interpretation reflected in the president's amended text. Ribeiro adds, “We're worried that this kind of language is showing up in several countries in the global South and we see it as a new push by the biotech industry to overturn the moratorium on Terminator at the CBD's meeting next year in Japan.”

Article 26 of Ecuador's Law on Food Sovereignty, entitled “Regulation of biotechnology and its products,” allowed for the import and processing of “raw materials containing transgenic inputs, provided they meet the requirements of health and safety, and that the reproductive capacity of the seeds is disabled by breaking [of grains] (...)”

The explicit clarification of “seed disabled by breaking” was included to ensure that if transgenic seeds were imported through food aid, or for processing, accidental gene flow from these grains would not contaminate crops in Ecuador, as has tragically happened in Mexico and other countries.

The partial-veto of President Correa removes the phrase “by breaking”¹ from this article, arguing that breaking the grains would mean increased costs. The result is that the amended wording now allows for the importation of GM materials provided only that the “reproductive capacity of seeds is disabled.” Such language equals an acceptance of grains with Terminator technology.

Elizabeth Bravo of Acción Ecológica, an internationally-respected environmental civil society organization in Ecuador, comments, “Unfortunately, the president's changes to the legislation reflect the influence of his biotech industry-friendly advisors. Terminator is an experimental technology that has never been proven. Scientific reports submitted to the CBD demonstrate that the complexity and instability of Terminator seeds mean that, in practice, there will still be leakage of GM traits. We could face a worst-case scenario: Ecuador enabling both GM contamination and suicide seeds. That is a direct threat to agricultural biodiversity, an essential basis for food sovereignty in Ecuador.”

Bravo added, “This text works against the provisions of article 73 of Ecuador's Constitution, which 'prohibits the introduction of organic and inorganic material that can alter in a definitive way the national genetic heritage.’”

Maria José Guazzelli from Brazil and the international Ban Terminator Campaign (made up of hundreds of organizations throughout the world), also voiced concern. “It would be outrageous for Ecuador, which always supported the international moratorium against Terminator, to open the gate to this terrible technology at the national level. Instead, Ecuador should legislate a ban on the import, development, trials and commercialization of Terminator seeds, as Brazil has already done.”

For more information:

Silvia Ribeiro, ETC Group (México) etcmexico@etcgroup.org, tel +52 (55) 5563 2664

Elizabeth Bravo, Acción Ecológica (Ecuador) ebravo@rallt.org, tel + 593 (2) 254 7516

María José Guazzelli, Ban Terminator Campaign, (Brazil), mariajose.guazzelli@gmail.com

¹ The second paragraph of article 26 of the Law on Food Sovereignty approved February 18th 2009, by the Ecuadorian National Assembly said : *Las materias primas que contengan insumos de origen transgénico únicamente podrán ser importadas y procesadas, siempre y cuando cumplan con los requisitos de sanidad e inocuidad y que su capacidad de reproducción como semillas sea inhabilitada por trozamiento, respetando el principio de precaución, de modo que no atenten contra la salud humana, la soberanía alimentaria y los ecosistemas. (...)*

The text proposed by President Rafael Correa on March 19th says: *Las materias primas que contengan insumos de origen transgénico únicamente podrán ser importadas y procesadas, siempre y cuando cumplan con los requisitos de sanidad e inocuidad y que su capacidad de reproducción como semillas sea inhabilitada, respetando el principio de precaución, de modo que no atenten contra la salud humana, la soberanía alimentaria y los ecosistemas.(...)*