



RAFI

Rural Advancement Foundation International
www.rafi.org | rafi@rafi.org

News Release – 24 March 2000

USDA Betrays Public Trust with Two New Terminator Patents

Will USDA's Biotech Advisory Board Demand Accountability?

The Rural Advancement Foundation International (RAFI), an international civil society organization based in Canada, announced today that the US Department of Agriculture (USDA) holds two new patents on the controversial Terminator technology, the genetic engineering of plants to render their seeds sterile. If commercialized, Terminator would make it impossible for farmers to save seeds from their harvest, forcing them to return to the commercial seed market every year.

“The US government is advancing research and squandering taxpayer dollars on a technology that has been universally condemned because it is bad for farmers, food security and biodiversity,” says Pat Mooney, Executive Director of RAFI. “It’s an egregious misallocation of public resources for the sole purpose of maximizing seed industry profits,” adds Mooney.

“It’s disgraceful,” says Hope Shand, RAFI’s Research Director. “We were shocked to discover USDA’s new patents because when we met with US Deputy Secretary of Agriculture Richard Rominger on two separate occasions last year, his staff assured us in no uncertain terms that there were no more patents in the works. Why didn’t we get the straight story?” asks Shand.

“Despite mounting opposition from national governments, United Nations’ agencies, farmers, scientists and civil society organizations around the world, USDA continues to ignore the public outcry at home and abroad,” adds Silvia Ribeiro, RAFI Programme Officer. Last month, for example, the Director General of the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization declared FAO’s opposition to Terminator. Earlier this month, the state of Maryland (US) introduced a bill to ban Terminator seeds. (See *RAFI Communique*, “Suicide Seeds on the Fast Track,” Feb./March, 2000, <http://www.rafi.org>).

According to RAFI, the new patents on genetic seed sterilization were issued in 1999. (US Patent No. 5,925,808 issued on July 20, 1999 and US Patent No. 5,977,441 issued on November 2, 1999). The patents are jointly owned by USDA and Delta & Pine Land (the world’s largest cotton seed company),

the owners of the original 1998 patent. The USDA's new patents share the same titles, inventors, and abstracts as the earlier patent, but they describe new innovations and demonstrate that USDA scientists are continuing to refine the technology and advance the research.

On October 28, 1999 representatives from a broad base of civil society organizations (CSOs) met with US Secretary of Agriculture Dan Glickman to demand that his agency abandon research and development of genetic seed sterilization. Participants included the American Corn Growers Association, Consumers Union, National Family Farm Coalition, Ralph Nader of Public Citizen, International Center for Technology Assessment, Mothers and Others for a Livable Planet, Consumer Federation, Sustainable Agriculture Coalition, RAFI, and RAFI-USA. Less than five days later, USDA won a new patent on Terminator.

Duped and Betrayed: “We feel duped and betrayed,” says Gary Goldberg, CEO of the American Corn Growers Association. “We demand to know why the USDA continues to invest taxpayer dollars on anti-farmer research that, if commercialized, will hold farmers hostage to giant agribusiness corporations,” said Goldberg.

Destroying National Seed Sovereignty: USDA's growing portfolio of Terminator patents sends an ominous message to the rest of the world, says Rafael Alegria, General Coordinator of Via Campesina, the largest confederation of peasants' and small farmers' organizations in Africa, Asia, Latin America, Europe and North America. “It amounts to a declaration of war against the 1.4 billion people who depend on farm-saved seeds – mainly poor people – and it's an assault on global food security,” explains Alegria.

Neth Dano, Executive Director of SEARICE, the Southeast Asian Regional Institute for Community Education, agrees, “This technology goes far beyond intellectual property. A patent expires after 20 years, but if Terminator seeds are commercialized it will give a handful of multinational Gene Giants a monopoly with no expiration date. This technology aims to eliminate the right of farmers to save seeds and do local plant breeding, and it will destroy the concept of national seed sovereignty.”

Litmus Test for USDA's Biotech Advisory Board: USDA's newly-appointed Biotech Advisory Board will hold its first meeting on March 29-30. “It's a litmus test for the USDA advisory board,” explains RAFI's Shand. Will they or won't they demand accountability from USDA? There's no doubt that the biotech advisory board has a full plate and it's loaded with controversial GMO (genetically modified organisms) issues, but Terminator must be the number one priority,” stresses Shand.

Launching Pad for Bioerfdom: Without effective action by civil society and governments to ban Terminator seeds, RAFI concludes that suicide seeds will be commercialized, with potentially disastrous consequences for farmers, food security and the environment.

“Terminator has grabbed the spotlight, but we are equally concerned about the closely related genetic trait control technologies (Traitor Tech) which enables a plant's genetic traits to be turned on or off with the application of an external chemical - the company's proprietary chemical,” adds Ribeiro. “Although the USDA and Delta & Pine Land are the high-profile crusaders, the goal of genetic trait control is industry-wide,” concludes Ribeiro.

Coming Soon: In May, 2000 RAFI will release a status report on Terminator and Traitor patents, which will examine the current goals of private and public sector institutions that are promoting bioserfdom with genetic trait control technology.

For more information:

Hope Shand, RAFI
Tel: 919 960-5223
Email: hope@rafi.org

Silvia Ribeiro, RAFI
Email: silvia@rafi.org

Julie Delahanty, RAFI
Tel: 819 827-9949
Email: julie@rafi.org

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Rafael Alegria, General Coordinator, Via Campesina

Tegucigalpa, Honduras, C.A.
email: viacam@gbm.hn

Neth Dano, Executive Director, SEARICE,

The Philippines
Tel: 63-2-922-6710
Email: SEARICE@philonline.com.ph

Gary Goldberg, CEO, American Corn Growers Association,

Tel: 918 488-1829 <http://www.acga.org>

Action Needed

1. USDA should cease negotiations with Delta & Pine Land on the licensing of it's jointly held patents, and abandon all research and patents on genetic seed sterilization.
2. USDA should adopt a strict policy prohibiting the use of taxpayer dollars to support genetic seed sterilization.

3. USDA should terminate all research on Terminator seed technology as well as the closely related genetic trait control technologies. Remote control of a plant's genetic traits, triggered by proprietary chemicals, is grim news for farmers and the environment because, if commercialized, farmers will become more dependent on chemical inputs manufactured by the agrochemical/seed industry.

4. USDA should use public research dollars to re-invigorate public plant breeding for family farmers and sustainable agriculture. Instead of engineering seeds for sterility, USDA should boost breeding programs that will lessen farmers' dependency on chemicals, fertilizers, and other expensive inputs.

Send a Message of Protest to US Secretary of Agriculture Dan Glickman

A sample letter to US Secretary of Agriculture Dan Glickman can be found on RAFI's web site:

<http://www.rafi.org>

Secretary Dan Glickman
USDA
200-A Whitten Bldg.
1400 Independence Ave., SW
Washington, DC 20250
email: agsec@usda.gov tel: 202 720-3631 fax: 202 720-2166

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.

RAFI International Office, 110 Osborne Street, Suite 202, Winnipeg, Manitoba, R3L 1Y5 Canada
Tel: 204 453-5259 Fax: 204 925-8034 email: rafi@rafi.org <http://www.rafi.org>