

LOHAFEX Update: Geo-engineering ship plows on as Environment Ministry calls for a halt

Amid a growing storm of protest stretching across four continents, the Federal Environment Minister of Germany, Sigmar Gabriel, has reportedly called for the German research vessel, *RV Polarstern*, to halt its controversial ocean fertilization experiment.¹ However, the geo-engineers on board appear to be ignoring the Minister's call. Already at sea, they are heading full steam for their intended dumping site.

Last week, ETC Group and our allies in Germany, India and South Africa reported on an Indo-German research expedition, codenamed LOHAFEX, which was about to breach the global moratorium on ocean fertilisation established through the UN Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD).² The LOHAFEX researchers plan to spread 6 tonnes of iron sulphate (in earlier statements, they said they had 20 tonnes of iron sulphate³) over a 300 square kilometre patch of ocean, in order to spur phytoplankton growth. This “ocean fertilization” experiment is just one example of proposed technologies to intentionally alter the climate, known collectively as geo-engineering. By targeting the high seas, the LOHAFEX researchers are clearly breaching the terms of the CBD moratorium.⁴

According to reports in today's German-language press, the German Federal Environment Minister Sigmar Gabriel is now joining the chorus of those calling for the LOHAFEX experiment to be stopped. The *Märkische Allgemeine* newspaper has reported excerpts from a letter sent from Minister Gabriel to his colleague, the Research Minister Annette Schavan. In the letter Gabriel asks Schavan to make sure that the project is “stopped immediately.”⁵ The operation “undermines Germany's credibility and pioneering role in the protection of biological diversity.”⁶ Sigmar Gabriel himself personally brokered the moratorium agreement on ocean fertilization at the CBD in Bonn last year. Gabriel holds the position of President of the Bureau overseeing the Convention.

While the message is now loud and clear from the Environment Minister, the researchers do not appear to be changing course. Instead, they have been issuing what appears to be wrong or contradictory information to the press and public. When contacted by ETC Group last week, Dr. Victor Smetacek, co-Chief Scientist of the LOHAFEX expedition, wrote from on board *Polarstern* that his expedition had the “the explicit permission of the German and Indian governments, including the German Ministry of

1 See <http://www.maerkischeallgemeine.de/cms/beitrag/11403492/485072/Vorhaben-des-Alfred-Wegener-Instituts-verstoest-offenbar-gegen.html>

2 See ETC news release, “German Geo-engineers Show Iron Will to Defy Global UN Moratorium,” January 8th 2009. Available online at http://www.etcgroup.org/en/materials/publications.html?pub_id=710

3 For earlier, 20 tonne claim, see the website of India's National Institute of Oceanography at http://www.nio.org/projects/narvekar/narvekar_NWAP2.jsp accessed 13th January 2009.

4 The full text of the CBD's decision on Ocean fertilization can be found at <http://www.cbd.int/decisions/cop9/?m=COP-09&id=11659&lg=0>

5 Available in German online at <http://www.maerkischeallgemeine.de/cms/beitrag/11403492/485072/Vorhaben-des-Alfred-Wegener-Instituts-verstoest-offenbar-gegen.html>

6 *Ibid.*

the Environment which hosted the CBD meeting last May.”⁷ The latest pronouncements from the Environment Minister appear to contradict this. When pressed by ETC group to reveal more details about the nature of that “explicit permission,” Dr. Smetacek has not offered any reply.

The LOHAFEX researchers have also issued an online statement in which they acknowledge that the CBD moratorium restricted small-scale scientific experiments to coastal waters. However they claim in their public statement that the CBD's requirement that “such experiments were to be restricted to coastal waters was perhaps an aberration, which has since been amended.”⁸ They appear to have told other members of the press that they had received special UN permission.⁹ Since the moratorium agreement was made in May 2008, there have been no processes or meetings within the context of CBD negotiations that would have allowed such an “aberration” to be “amended.” ETC Group has contacted the Secretariat of the CBD for advice on this issue. The next opportunity for the international community to discuss ocean fertilization is in two parallel meetings of the London Convention's Scientific Groups (11-13th February 2009) and the meeting of the Bureau of the Convention on Biological Diversity (13th February). The LOHAFEX researchers appear to be timing their iron dump to pre-empt discussions in both fora.

“The LOHAFEX geo-engineers seem intent on defying not only a United Nations agreement, but even their own Environment Minister,” argues Jim Thomas of the ETC Group. “This case clearly shows why we need strong enforceable rules to prevent rogue geo-engineers from unilaterally tinkering with the planet.”

For more information contact:

Jim Thomas - ETC Group (Montreal, Canada) jim@etcgroup.org
Phone: +1 514 6674932 Cell: +1 514 5165759

Pat Mooney - ETC Group (Ottawa, Canada) etc@etcgroup.org
Phone: +1 613 2412267 Cell: +1 613 2610688

Kathy Jo Wetter – ETC Group (Durham, NC, USA) kjo@etcgroup.org
Phone: +1 919 688 7302

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7 ETC Group, Email communication from Dr. Victor Smetacek.

8 Lohafex statement online at http://www.nio.org/projects/narvekar/Lohafex_news.pdf. Viewed on 13th January 2009.

9 “...And it has led to the researchers being granted permission by the UN to move ahead with the experiment,” from Jo Macfarlane, “Amazing discovery of green algae which could save the world from global warming,” *Daily Mail* (UK), 4th January 2009. Available online at <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/sciencetech/article-1104772/Amazing-discovery-green-algae-save-world-global-warming.html>