

LOHAFEX Update: Throwing precaution (and iron) to the wind (and waves)

ETC Group joined the chorus of voices, including the German Environment Ministry, expressing its deep regret at the decision of the German Minister of Research to re-authorize the controversial LOHAFEX ocean fertilization expedition. Researchers on board the German vessel RV Polarstern have now begun dumping 6 tons of iron sulphate over 300 square kilometers of open ocean in the Scotia Sea (east of Argentina) to artificially prompt the growth of a large plankton bloom. It will be one of the largest ocean fertilization experiments to date.

The LOHAFEX expedition had been temporarily suspended by German Research Minister, Annette Schavan, at the request of the German Environment Minister, following opposition by civil society groups and experts who said the expedition violated the moratorium on ocean fertilization agreed to last year at the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD).¹ Over the past weeks, Schavan's staff commissioned documents to justify the expedition. Those hastily assembled documents were released on January 26, along with Minister Schavan's announcement that she was re-authorizing the expedition. In response, the German Environment Ministry re-iterated its opposition to the LOHAFEX expedition, issuing a strong statement² criticizing the failure to guarantee independent monitoring and citing concerns expressed by the scientific community, including the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) around ocean fertilization, which led to the *de facto* moratorium agreed at last year's CBD meeting.

“We are outraged that Minister Schavan has given a green light to start dumping iron despite concerns expressed by the Environment Minister and a broad coalition of civil society organizations as well as scientists,” said Silvia Ribeiro of ETC Group, speaking from the World Social Forum in Belém, Brazil. “This decision shows an astonishing disregard for the decision of the Conference of the Parties to the UN Convention on Biological Diversity – in which the German government played a key role – and will seriously undermine Germany's credibility at future negotiations. It also gives the wrong signal to the geo-engineers who would like to re-engineer our planet for profit.”

The CBD agreement specified that any scientific experiments had to be “small scale” and “within coastal waters.” While it is unclear whether 300 square kilometers (about the size of Tobago) represents “small scale,” the location being targeted is clearly on the high seas and far from the coast. The LOHAFEX researchers have argued that this high seas location counts as coastal waters because some

1 The decision of the Conference of the Parties to the CBD on ocean fertilization can be found here:

<http://www.cbd.int/decisions/cop9/?m=COP-09&id=11659&lg=0>

2 For the statement of the German Environment Ministry:

http://www.bmu.de/english/current_press_releases/pm/42985.php

species of plankton found there are also found near the coast. “Applying this creative definition means that much of the planet's oceans could theoretically be re-classified as 'coastal,' rendering the term meaningless,” notes ETC's Jim Thomas. “Astonishingly, Minister Schavan appears to have accepted this unusual argument.” Thomas adds, “If the German government has concerns with the terms of the CBD agreement, they should bring them up through the proper channels for renegotiation.” Regrettably the decision to move ahead appears to pre-empt international discussions on the matter that are scheduled to take place in less than two weeks at both the next meeting of the London Convention's Scientific Groups (11-13th February 2009) and the next meeting of the CBD Bureau (13th February 2009).

LOHAFEX is not an isolated case. Environmentalists were alarmed to learn last week³ of yet another ocean fertilization scheme in the works. This time, it's the nitrate-rich fertilizer urea that is expected to be dumped as early as March in the Tasman Sea (between Australia and New Zealand). Operating under the auspices of the University of Sydney's Ocean Technology Group directed by Ian S. F. Jones, the project sponsors are awaiting the Australian government's green light to spread urea in international waters. While done under the auspices of a “research institute,” Professor Jones is also the front man for the Ocean Nourishment Corporation and is well known for his interest in the potential profits to be made from such projects.⁴ It seems that the caution which informed the CBD's deliberations less than a year ago has been thrown to the wind, and civil society will need to work hard to maintain the moratorium and make sure it is enforced.

For more information contact:

Jim Thomas - ETC Group (Montreal, Canada) jim@etcgroup.org
Phone: +1 514 273 9994 Cell: +1 514 5165759

Pat Mooney - ETC Group (Ottawa, Canada) etc@etcgroup.org
Phone: +1 613 241 2267 Cell: +1 613 2610688

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

3 See Ben Cubby, “Climate scientists seek a urea moment,” *Sydney Morning Herald*, January 21, 2009; available online: <http://www.smh.com.au/news/environment/global-warming/climate-scientists-seek-a-urea-moment/2009/01/20/1232213646774.html>

4 See, for example, Shoji, K. and Jones, Ian S. F., “The costing of carbon credits from ocean nourishment plants,” *Science of the total environment*, vol. 277, no1-3, pp. 27-31, 2001.