
Resistance is fertile: Protests against GM trees

Forestry scientists working on GM trees often point to the number of field trials of GM trees worldwide as evidence that the technology is increasingly accepted. In fact the reverse is true. As the number of experiments increases so does the strength of the resistance against GM trees.

Much of the media attention on protests against GM trees has focussed on a handful of actions by small groups of activists calling themselves names like Reclaim the Seeds or the Genetix Goblins. In the past six years, activists have destroyed 12 GM tree trials, in Britain, Canada and the US. In the US, the Earth Liberation Front has burned down offices and research laboratories.

Industry and scientists responses to destruction of GM trials and property focus on the damage caused and portray the protesters as irresponsible, ignorant vandals. Their responses tend, predictably, to play down the risks that their research might inflict on people and their environments.

In 1999, protesters in England cut down 152 GM poplars at agrochemical company Zeneca's Jealot's Hill research station. Zeneca spokesperson Nigel Poole appeared almost tearful. "The bark has been stripped from the trees. These poor things are now dying a slow death," he told The Times newspaper. Apparently Poole had forgotten that Zeneca planted the trees in order that they could be chipped, boiled, pulped and made into paper.

When some of his GM tree trials were destroyed in March 2001, Oregon State University's Steven Strauss tried to reassure the public that "It's all regarded as highly safe. These people pronouncing it dangerous lack expertise and are uninformed."

"The violent guys just don't understand the science," Strauss told Associated Press.

Many people and organisations are involved in other types of activities against GM trees. Protests against GM trees have taken many forms and have included banner hangs, press conferences, meetings, letters to newspapers, petitions, articles, campaigns to persuade companies not buy products from GM trees, research into the companies and institutions involved, and campaigns for GMO free zones.

Probably the first alliance of NGOs formed to oppose GM trees was the GE Free Forests Coalition (GEFF), formed in Britain in April 1999. Three months later, GEFF organised a demonstration at IUFRO's Forest Biotechnology '99 conference in Oxford.

Steven Strauss commented, "The scientists at the meeting scratched their heads and wondered how science and 'society' could be so out of whack in Europe." Meanwhile, ordinary people were wondering how long the scientists must have spent locked away in their laboratories to be surprised that genetic modification was a controversial issue.

Resistance to GM trees continues to grow. In the US, around 80 NGOs have signed on to a statement titled: "A Common Vision for Transforming the Paper Industry". The Common Vision

emerged from a November 2002 meeting of more than 50 NGOs working on paper, pollution and forest issues. The Common Vision includes a demand to the paper industry: "Stop the introduction of paper fiber from genetically modified organisms, particularly transgenic trees and plants with genes inserted from other species of animals and plants."

Several countries have placed outright bans or moratoria on GMOs, including Algeria, New Zealand, Peru, El Salvador and Australia (except Queensland and the Northern Territory). In addition, several regions in Europe and three counties in the US have voted in bans on GMOs. Thailand has banned 49 GM plants.

Around the world environmental and social justice organisations are campaigning for legislation to ban GMOs from their countries, provinces, states, towns or counties. GM free zones have appeared all over the world, including the US. In November 2004, Marin County, north of San Francisco, joined California's Mendocino and Trinity counties in banning GMOs.

In December 2003, the Austrian province of Kärnten passed a law which stated that GMOs cannot be planted within three kilometres of natural and cultural areas that are worthy of protection. Approximately 20 per cent of Kärnten's land is organically farmed. On the grounds that organic farming is worthy of protection, in practice the authorities will give no permits for planting GMOs.

In Britain, 14 million people live in areas with a GM-free policy. Twelve counties have passed GM-free resolutions in addition to more than 30 towns, cities, districts and national park authorities. In France, more than 1,250 mayors have issued GM free declarations for their towns. Friends of the Earth Europe is running a GMO-free Europe campaign, aimed at supporting regions to go GM-free (for more information, see <http://www.foeeurope.org/GMOs/gmofree>).

People opposing GM trees are linking up with organisations around the world: with networks that have opposed the spread of GMO crops in their countries; with organisations working on climate change; with anti-globalisation activists; with human rights activists and indigenous peoples; with local communities and organisations that are resisting industrial tree plantations and other forms of industrial forestry. The resistance to GM trees is growing!

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