

GE Trees in 2016 TelePress Conference Remarks by Anne Petermann

Good afternoon and welcome members of the press to our GE Trees in 2016 press conference.

I'm Anne Petermann, Executive Director of Global Justice Ecology Project and Coordinator of the International Campaign to STOP Genetically Engineered Trees. I've been working on the problem of GE trees since 1999. I am joined today by a panel of experts who will be speaking to you about the state of genetically engineered trees in 2016 and what we are planning to do about them. This panel includes Dr. Ricarda Steinbrecher, geneticist and Co-Director of Oxford-based EcoNexus, Dr. Doug Gurian Sherman, Senior Scientist at the Center for Food Safety, Dr. Rachel Smolker, Co-Director of Biofuelwatch and BJ McManama, GE Trees Campaigner for Indigenous Environmental Network.

There will also be brief overviews of the problems with genetically engineered trees, why they are such an exceptional threat to our forests and communities--and some discussion of the forces and issues driving large-scale development of genetically engineered trees.

We plan to keep the presentations to about 40 minutes, to allow time for question and answer, and of course you can always follow up with our media coordinator Kip if you want interviews with any of the presenters after this press conference is over.

Before we get into the rapidly evolving current situation with GE trees, I want to quickly touch on the particular dangers inherent to GE trees.

Genetically engineering trees is much more dangerous than the engineering of annual crop plants because of the unique characteristics of trees.

For example, far from being annual plants, trees live for decades if not centuries. Some even live for thousands of years. Studies have documented pine pollen traveling for upwards of 600 miles and a study at Duke University found that at least a small percentage of this pollen remains viable. Seeds are distributed by birds and animals over great distances as well.

Many of the trees being engineered have native wild relatives that are widely distributed geographically. Combined with the distances pollen can travel, this means that contamination of these wild relatives is both inevitable and irreversible. Poplars, for example are one of the main species being engineered and they have native wild relatives all over North America and Europe--about 30 different species.

Additionally, forest ecosystems are extremely complex, having evolved over millions of years and including not only trees and plants, but fungi, soil microorganisms, insects, birds, wildlife and other biodiversity, not to mention forest dependent and Indigenous human communities. The impact of engineered traits being released into or contaminating these forests are impossible to predict, but potentially extremely serious. Consider for example, trees engineered to manufacture insecticide. Insects are a key strand in the forest ecosystem web, with many songbirds, insects and other animals directly dependent on them. The insecticide may travel up the food chain, killing non-target species as well.

And finally--and this will be discussed more later--the colonization of native forest ecosystems by non-native invasive GE trees such as eucalyptus.

For these reasons & many more, a full cycle risk assessment of GE trees is both critically important and basically impossible, leading to the inevitable conclusion that all forms of GE trees must be rejected, and all field trials removed.

Update on the GE trees Situation

With regard to this effort to stop GE trees, the situation over the past year has been evolving rapidly. In 2015 we saw significant events on both sides of the GE trees issue. Prior to last year there was only one country in the world where GE trees were allowed, and that was China, where some 450 hectares of Bt black poplars were planted starting in 2001.

ArborGen

But last year things really came to a head. In January it was revealed that the USDA had granted unprecedented permission to ArborGen to commercially develop GE Loblolly pines with no federal oversight, no public input and no risk assessment.

ArborGen is the world's leading GE tree company, and was founded as a joint venture back in 1999 by Monsanto, International Paper, Westvaco and Fletcher Challenge Forests.

The USDA's decision was met with outrage by groups around the US, more than 120,000 letters of protest, and a direct action at the World Headquarters of ArborGen, where Ruddy Turnstone, our GE Trees Campaigner and myself were arrested and dragged away by police for demanding that ArborGen stop hiding their plans for these GE pines, and for trying to deliver to ArborGen's CEO, petitions signed by more than a quarter of a million people just in 2015.

Following the action, ArborGen made their first public statement about these GE loblolly pines claiming they had "moved on to other things."

A mere two months later, however, ArborGen was fined \$53.5million for using what the judge called "trickery and deceit" to defraud their employees out of millions of dollars. Which begs the question, if ArborGen lies to and defrauds their own employees, how can we possibly believe anything they say about their GE trees?

We are continuing to mobilize against ArborGen with groups throughout the Southeast this year, including strategy meetings, actions and other plans.

We are also keeping an eye on ArborGen's petition to legalize their freeze tolerant GE eucalyptus trees. It's been 5 years now since they requested permission for these trees and the only action we've seen on the matter was when the USDA released the petition for public comments in early 2013. Comments were submitted at the rate of 10,000 to one opposing the GE trees. There has been nothing public since then, though our alliance is prepared to rapidly respond if and when the USDA ever releases their draft Environmental Impact Statement on this petition.

[For fully linked documentation on ArborGen, please see attached document "History of ArborGen"]

But the US is not the only place where the GE tree issue has been coming to a head. One month after finding out about ArborGen's Loblolly pines last January, we learned that the Brazilian Biosafety Commission (CTNBio) was to meet in March to decide whether to legalize commercial production of GE eucalyptus trees developed by FuturaGene.

Actions and protests were immediately mobilized at Brazilian Embassies and Consulates on six continents. 150,000 signatures were gathered. On the day of the CTNBio meeting, more than 1,000 women from social movements around Brazil took over a FuturaGene greenhouse where GE eucalyptus were being grown, and La Via Campesina, the global peasant's movement, took over and shut down the CTNBio meeting.

Another round of global protests took place immediately before CTNBio's rescheduled meeting in April. While CTNBio did ultimately and illegally approve FuturaGene's request, legal teams, social movements, NGOs and others have been mobilizing to stop implementation of this decision.

And this year, organizations in the remote northern regions directly threatened by these GE eucalyptus are bringing together and educating people in their communities to build local opposition to GE trees.

Other plans we have for this year:

SUNY ESF plans to begin the process of deregulation for the GE American chestnut and we are organizing to stop it.

These GE American chestnuts are unique among the trees that we are working on as the nuts they produce are commonly eaten. In addition, the plan by William Powell and others developing these GE trees is to release them directly into forests with the intention of contaminating wild American chestnuts.

We will be linking up with both forest protection and GMO food groups to stop the legalization of these dangerous trees, and to ensure the forests, wildlife and communities of the eastern forests are protected.

[For more details, see attached fact sheet on GE chestnuts]

Forest Certification

We are also working to continue to strengthen the anti-GE tree positions of the 3 major forest certification schemes: the FSC, SFI and Programme for the Endorsement of Forest Certification. All three of these currently prohibit GE trees, and we want them to also remove certification from any companies pursuing GE trees. We want to ensure that there is no possible way to pretend GE trees are sustainable, and to economically disadvantage companies that pursue them.

[For exact language of certification schemes, see attached document "GE Trees & Certification"]

Industry Disinformation:

And a major ongoing part of our work over the coming year and beyond is identifying and countering false claims about the role of GE trees in protecting forest health.

To win public approval for GE trees, industry is framing itself as a force for forest protection and restoration. The Forest Health Initiative, for example, has the stated mission of "exploring biotechnology to protect forest health". Not surprisingly, their initial focus is to win public and regulatory approval for engineered chestnuts, largely killed off by an introduced blight in the early 1900s. But in reality, they are using the GE American chestnut to win public and regulatory approval and open the door for other GE trees.

Industry also claims that faster growing trees will produce “more wood on less land” and reduce logging on native forests. However, studies are clear. The faster tree plantations grow, the more economic incentive there is to spread them and the faster they replace native forests., with plantation expansion causing more deforestation than logging.

[See attached document “GE Trees Will Increase Deforestation”]

Another industry favorite is that GE trees will help stop climate change. GE trees will be faster growing, storing more carbon, etc. However, once again, studies show the reality of the situation, which is that plantations only store about $\frac{1}{4}$ the carbon of native forests. So the more plantations, or GE tree plantations there are, the worse it is for the climate.

We will be very busy over the course of 2016 addressing these myriad threats from GE trees and strengthening the global campaign to stop GE trees.

[For a complete history of the Campaign to STOP GE Trees since its inception in 2000, see the attached document]