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Genetically modified trees – Chapter 5

By Chris Lang, published by WRM and FoEI, December 2004

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5. Resistance is fertile: Protests against GM trees^[241]

Most protests against GMOs have been against GM crops, for the simple reason that GM crops are already commercially planted. GM trees, if they were to be commercially planted, would present even greater risks to the environment than GM crops.

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. The Earth Liberation Front has burned down offices and research laboratories.

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.

Several NGOs have formed alliances to campaign against GM trees. Probably the first 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. Rod Harbinson, a GEFF spokesperson, told *The Guardian*:

“The science is moving so fast they are not considering the effect on the environment. Trees are much closer to the wild than genetic engineered crops which have been interbred for centuries. Trees have an urge to spread their genes. There has already been a case with GM aspens in Germany flowering when they were supposed not to be able to. We are alarmed that these trees will pollute the environment. These companies meeting in Oxford are looking for profits and are out of control. Reducing the amount of lignin affects the trees' resistance to insects. We have no idea what pests and diseases will be let loose which can spread to our natural forests.”^[242]

In 2000, a group of NGOs formed the Global Alliance Against Genetically Engineered Trees. Action for Social and Ecological Justice (ASEJ) was among the founding organisations. In July 2001, ASEJ organised North America's first public demonstration against GE trees in Washington State during a conference on genetically engineered trees.[243]

Beginning in autumn 2002, ASEJ organised four meetings in the US, in regions where scientists were carrying out GM tree research, followed by a national meeting which included participants from Rainforest Action Network, Dogwood Alliance and Forest Ethics.[244] The campaign's aim is an international ban on the release of GM trees, including field trials and commercial plantations.

In 2003, another alliance was formed, called the Stop GE Trees Coalition. The coalition includes Sierra Club, Rainforest Action Network, WildLaw, Global Justice Ecology Project, Polaris Institute, Forest Ethics, Northwest Resistance Against Genetic Engineering, Dogwood Alliance, American Lands Alliance and Institute for Social Ecology's Biotechnology Project.

In June 2003, the Stop GE Trees Coalition launched a campaign against International Paper with a demonstration at an Xpedx store, which is owned by International Paper. Some activists wandered around dressed as old growth trees while others held a banner reading "Stop GE Trees".[245] The same month, three protesters were arrested after chaining themselves inside a University of California-Davis building in a protest against GM tree research.[246]

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 in the US. The Common Vision includes the 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".[247]

In 2003, US photocopy paper giant Kinko's announced that it would not buy from suppliers selling paper manufactured from GM trees.[248] Several companies have made commitments to purchase only Forest Stewardship Council certified timber. For example, US companies Alexandria Moulding and Golden State Lumber have committed not to buy any radiata pine from Chile unless it is FSC certified. Many other companies state a "preference" for FSC timber.[249]

The Environment and Conservation Organisations of New Zealand (ECO), a group with 65 member organisations, is attempting to use the Forest Stewardship Council's exclusion of GM trees from FSC certified tree plantations, in their campaign against GM trees. Cath Wallace, ECO's co-chair stated in 2003: "Planting genetically engineered radiata pine and spruce trees is a waste of time and money because their products will not be acceptable under international plantation standards to which New Zealand companies are intending to work." [250]

Another strategy, which has appeared in various forms around the world, is to campaign for legislation banning GMOs from specific areas. GM free zones have appeared all over the world, even in the US. In March 2004, residents in Mendocino County voted to ban the use of GMOs in the county.[251] Mendocino County is the first county in the US to ban GMOs, but votes on similar bans will take place in four other Californian counties in November 2004.

Also in March 2004, senators in Vermont voted 28-0 to pass a bill to hold biotech companies liable for genetic pollution of conventional or organic crops. "The Farmer Protection Act is a pre-emptive strike to stop predatory lawsuits against Vermont's family farmers by biotech companies like Monsanto," said Ben Davis of the Vermont

Public Interest Research Group (VPIRG).[252] VPIRG is part of a coalition of groups leading a campaign for the first GM free state in the US.

In December 2003, the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* reported that the Austrian province of Kärnten had passed a law which stated that GMOs cannot be planted within three kilometres of natural and cultural areas that are worthy of protection.[253] 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. [254] In France, more than 1,250 mayors have issued GM free declarations for their towns.[255] Friends of the Earth Europe has launched a [GMO-free Europe](#) campaign, aimed at supporting regions to go GM-free.

After the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change decided in December 2003 to include GM trees in the Clean Development Mechanism, the [People's Forest Forum](#) in Finland launched a petition calling for a global ban on GM trees. People's Forest Forum consists of the People's Biosafety Association, the Union of Ecoforestry and Friends of the Earth Finland. The petition is to be presented to the UNFCCC at the tenth conference of the parties in Buenos Aires in December 2004. People's Forest Forum states: "The course taken in Milan was a wrong one. We do not need plantations of genetically modified tree clones on our planet. Plans like this are in direct contradiction to the terms of the Rio Convention on Biodiversity."

What you can do:

Forestry scientists working on GM trees often argue that more research is required, but the kind of research they are talking about is more and bigger field trials. Some scientists even talk of the need for widespread releases of GM trees, in order to find out what the problems might be. In fact the kind of research that we need, as opponents of GM trees, is political research into the actors involved in promoting and developing GM trees. We need to understand why they are interested in GM trees, where their financing comes from and how they hope to benefit from GM trees. We need research which explores the conflicts of interest between regulators and scientists. This is the kind of research that forestry scientists do not carry out. It is the kind of research they would prefer that no one carried out.

The actors, particularly corporations, involved in research into GM trees are often reluctant to release any details about their research, because they do not want a public debate about what they are doing. This report details some of the activities of some of the companies involved, but there are many more. Research into these companies can help expose some of their involvement in developing GM trees.

Governments cannot be allowed to write legislation for the benefit of their corporations. Even worse, the US government cannot be allowed to meddle in other government's legislation for the benefit of US corporations. Yet this is precisely what it is attempting to do around the world.

We can dismantle the political machinery that produces GM trees piece by piece. Every time we raise the issue in public we win a victory. Every time we raise a banner against GM trees we win another victory. Every time we protest outside meetings of forestry scientists we win another victory. Every time we stop or even slow down the development of an industrial tree plantation, we are helping create political space to stop GM trees. Here are some of the things you can do:

1. Find out whether there are any GM tree field trials in your country or region of your country. Find out what legislation covers such trials. Demand environmental impact assessments and any other documentation that companies have to provide before they can carry out trials.
2. Publicise any information you find out – either by setting up your own web-site, or by sending the information to [World Rainforest Movement](#) and to [Friends of the Earth International](#) and we will post it in our websites.
3. Write to local newspapers, politicians and regulatory authorities opposing the development of GM trees (using a pen-name if necessary, if, for example, it is not safe in your country to oppose the government).
4. Form your own groups, networks and alliances to oppose GM trees.
5. Set up your own GM free zone. See [FoE Europe](#)'s web-site for more information.

Networks of people and organisations around the world are coming together to oppose GM trees. People opposing GM trees are linking up with organisations and other people 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!

[Further reading »](#)

Footnotes

[241] I borrowed the title [Resistance is fertile](#) from the [actions and discussions](#) organised to coincide with the sixth conference of parties of the Convention on Biodiversity, held in the Hague, 2002.

[242] Quoted in Libby Brooks and Paul Brown, Felled in the name of natural justice: GM firm condemns destruction of 152 trees, *The Guardian*, UK, 13 July 1999.

[243] [History of Global Justice Ecology Project](#), Action for Social and Ecological Justice.

[244] [United States: Kinkos says no to genetically engineered trees](#), World Rainforest Movement Bulletin No. 69, April 2003.

[245] [International Paper Under Fire for Producing GE Trees](#), Action for Social and Ecological Justice, 21 July 2003.

[246] Paul Elias, [Frankentrees Are Spreading Across the U.S.](#), *Associated Press*, 31 July 2003.

[247] [A Common Vision for Transforming the Paper Industry: Striving for Environmental and Social Sustainability](#).

[248] [United States: Kinkos says no to genetically engineered trees](#), World Rainforest Movement Bulletin No. 69, April 2003.

[249] See Forest Ethics' [web-site](#).

[250] “Forest Research Institute GE tree Planting Unacceptable under International Standards”, Environment and Conservation Organisations of New Zealand press release, 24 July 2003.

[251] Lynn Alley, [More California Counties to Vote on Banning Genetically Engineered Crops](#), *Wine Spectator*, USA, 28 June 2004.

[252] [Vermont Bill is first-in-the-nation to hold biotech corporations accountable for contamination by genetically engineered crops](#), GE Free Vermont press release, 10 March 2004.

[253] Michael Frank, “Kärnten versucht EU auszutricksen: Gesetz verbietet indirekt genmanipulierte Pflanzen”, *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 24,25,26 December 2003.

[254] [Hampshire vote brings GM-free population to 14 million](#), Friends of the Earth UK press release, 26 February 2004.

[255] [GMO Free Europe: France](#) Friends of the Earth Europe.

[256] [GMO-free Europe campaign](#).

[257] [People's Forest Forum](#).

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