

Thin Ice



the GM Freeze Campaign newsletter

Issue 33, April 2014

Bt cotton crop failure drives Karnataka Monsanto/Mayco ban

In March the Indian state of Karnataka indefinitely banned the sale of Monsanto/Mayco's Bt and hybrid cottonseed following reports of a 50% crop failure in seven districts amounting to losses of 2.3 billion rupees (£22.9 million). The Karnataka Government rejected a company offer of compensation in lieu of a ban.

The Bangalore Mirror reported an unnamed source saying, "Farmers have suffered massive losses as the crops have failed despite the company making tall advertisements about the superiority of its genetically-modified seeds ... Not only were the crops attacked by pests, but in most areas the plants failed to produce cotton bolls ... Farmers wanted the company to be blacklisted."

The State Agriculture Commissioner said, "We are taking tough action against the company. This will set a

"In the long run, we want to eradicate Bt cotton ... it is utterly unsuited to our conditions."

precedent for other such occurrences."

The neighbouring state of Maharashtra banned Monsanto/Mayco Bt cottonseed last year, with the Maharashtra State Agriculture Minister saying in June 2013, "In the long run, we want to eradicate it [Bt cotton] because it is water-intensive and utterly unsuited to our conditions." [TI 27, 28, 30]

The biopiracy case against Monsanto/Mayco for its GM brinjal (aubergine) continues.



GET ACTIVE

Demand democracy not corporate rule

We have an important chance to prevent corporations gaining sweeping new rights to sue governments, and we must act now.

Proposals in the ongoing negotiations for a new EU/US Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP, sometimes called TAFTA) include something called an Investor/State Dispute Settlement mechanism (ISDS). This is an agreement that would enable companies to sue countries directly and overturn laws that have an adverse effect on their ability to make money, without any democratic oversight or recourse. For example this could mean that Monsanto could sue France for its renewed ban on GM maize MON810 (see below).

The ISDS proposal would apply to all sectors and the implications for democratic decision making and our right to expect our elected representatives to enact laws to protect us and our environment are immense.

The European Commission is consulting on this proposal, so you can have a say now. Just send an email to EU Trade Commissioner Karel de Gucht at Karel.DE-GUCHT@ec.europa.eu and tell him that no trade deal can possibly be acceptable if it includes an Investor/State mechanism.

We have a right to make the laws we need without fear that unaccountable companies will overturn them for private profit. Thank you for your help with this important issue. Deadline for emails is 11 June.

INTERNATIONAL ROUNDUP

Africa

South Africa

In March the South African Advertising Standards Authority (ASA) upheld a complaint lodged by the African Centre for Biosafety and ordered Monsanto to immediately withdraw a radio advertisement in which the company made unsubstantiated claims that GM crops “enable us to produce more food sustainably whilst using fewer resources, provide a healthier environment by saving on pesticides, decrease greenhouse gas emissions and increase crop yields substantially”. This is not the first time the company has been ordered to withdraw unsubstantiated ads. [TI 25, 28]

Americas

Argentina

Authorities in Cordoba province rejected Monsanto’s environmental impact assessment for the company’s proposed 1.5 billion peso (£112.2 million) seed production plant. Work on the facility has been halted since September. The office of the Governor of Cordoba said Monsanto’s assessment did not “identify the relevant impacts and resulting mitigation measures”. A company spokesperson said Monsanto “is starting from scratch with the whole process, and preparing a new environmental assessment with new standards”.

Brazil

In March the Federal Court of Appeals unanimously annulled the release of Bayer’s Liberty Link corn citing a lack of study of the risks. Brazilian law requires decisions to be supported by studies of the risks for each biome (ie, major regional group of distinctive plant and animal communities adapted to the physical natural environment and conditions). The lawyer representing the complainants said, “Today’s ruling deserves detailed study because it covers the topic in depth, analyzing the legal aspects combining the social and economic consequences of the release of GMOs in Brazil for future generations... After ten years of commercial release of GM crops in Brazil, the debate over the issue has intensified in more complex ways, exposing the weakness of pesticides and GMO-based agriculture. The court decision today is an important element

“The GM story is being pushed around nowadays because it’s beneficial to a few companies. Africa should have its own food sovereignty... We live in this age of climate change which requires diversity in plants, ecosystems and knowledge and strategy ... It’s a clash of a vision of two kinds of agricultural future. One says the most important thing is productivity, so for that we have to improve the seeds, supply the seeds with chemicals and if there is a problem with pests, we have to supply pesticides. The other view is that there’s economic, social and environmental change, and changing scenarios necessitate dealing with challenges in diverse ways – meaning diverse agricultural systems, diverse knowledge systems and so on.”

Alliance for Food Sovereignty in Africa Coordinator on Ethiopia’s preparations for its first GM cotton planting

that will add to the people’s struggle for a model of agriculture based on agroecology, which guarantees rights for farmers and healthy food without pesticides for the population.”

Chile

In March activists forced the withdrawal of a Bill that would have granted seed patenting rights to multinational corporations. The Government said it will now “analyze all that is known in our country and internationally about this issue in order to protect the rights of agricultural communities, small and medium-sized farmers, and the heritage of seeds in our country”.

A spokesperson for the National Association of Rural and Indigenous Women (Anamuri) said, “All of the resistance that rural organizations, principally indigenous communities, led during these past years was a success. We were able to convey to the Parliament how harmful the law would be for the indigenous communities and farmers who feed us all. Big agriculture, or agribusiness, is just that, a business. It doesn’t feed our country.” Activists will now appeal to the President to withdraw the Bill permanently and not set up an impact study.

Mexico

Following a ban of GM maize cultivation [TI 32] the Second District Court of Campeche ruled in favour of a lawsuit brought by Mayan communities against the Agriculture Ministry and banned GM soyabean cultivation in the region. Among the complainants were beekeepers facing market rejection of their product, which is now contaminated with GM pollen, claiming this as a violation of their right to a healthy environment. The Court found that the approval of the crop violated procedures advising against GM soya cultivation in designated areas.

In February a report from the Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute found that six honey samples from nine hives in Campeche contained soya pollen, two of which were GM. A senior staff scientist at the Smithsonian said, “We cautiously interpret these results as significant for elsewhere in Mexico, where some five times the GM soya grown in Campeche is found, and beekeeping is alive and well, not to mention the rest of the world ... Bees from a single colony may gather nectar and pollen resources from flowers in a 200-square-kilometer area. With an economy based on subsistence agriculture associated with

“It would erase the history of our grandparents, our ancestors who taught us how to care for and grow our seeds.”

Anamuri spokesperson on the withdrawn seed patenting Bill in Chile

honey production, the social implications of this shift in the status of honey are likely to be contentious and have profound implications for beekeeping in general.” Mexico is the world’s fourth largest honey producer, and the fifth largest honey exporter.

US

In February multinational grain exporters Cargill and Bunge announced they will reject crops delivered for export if they contain a new Syngenta GM maize Agrisure Duracade. The crop is being grown in the US for the first time this season but is not approved in either China or the EU, and China is rejecting US corn shipments that contain another unapproved Syngenta GM trait. [TI 32] China is also reported to be testing soya imports for contamination with Syngenta’s GM MIR162 maize. Both the National Grain and Feed Association and the North American Export Grain Association asked Syngenta in January to suspend US use of Duracade and MIR162 until China and other export markets approve them. Syngenta refused.

In February Scotts Miracle-Gro announced its employees will test GM Roundup Ready Kentucky bluegrass seed in their home gardens. This is legal as the crop falls between the regulatory cracks overseeing food, plant pests (eg, GMOs created with agrobacterium or viruses) or plant pesticides (eg, Bt crops). Scotts has failed to clean up the now widespread contamination of Oregon watercourses with escaped experimental GM bentgrass designed for golf courses. [TI 20, 21, 28] Doug Gurian-Sherman from the Union of Concerned Scientists said, “Whether GMO bluegrass is commercialised or not, its exclusion from GMO regulation points to dysfunction at USDA.”

In February a study from the US Geological Survey, accepted for publication by Environmental Toxicology and Chemistry, found that Roundup and its toxic byproduct AMPA were found in over 75% of Mississippi air and rain samples tested in 2007. Glyphosate was found in 86% of air samples 77% of rain samples, reiterating that industrial agriculture has changed our daily exposure to agrichemicals.

A USDA report in February found that after 15 years of GM cultivation, the technology has brought “mixed” results, admitting, “[I]n fact, the yields of herbicide-tolerant or insect-resistant seeds may be occasionally lower than the yields of conventional varieties,” a point GM Freeze made long ago. The report also cited glyphosate use contributing to the rise of resistant superweeds. One of the USDA report authors said, “We are not characterizing them [GMO crops] as bad or good. We are just providing information.”

Asia

China

In February the Ministry of Finance announced a ban on GM oil in staff canteens in line with a 2013 order that staff health must be protected.

Europe

In February the Health and Food Safety Committee voted for a resolution criticising European Commission proposals on cloning in the food chain. [TI 16, 20] The Commission proposed to ban clones for food but is silent on the far more problematic issue of clone offspring in the food chain. Daciana Sârbu MEP, who drafted the resolution, said: “A ban on food from clones is not enough. In fact it is almost meaningless because the EU would continue to support the cruel and unnecessary practice of cloning by marketing the products from the offspring and descendants of clones. At the very least, we want products from the cloning process to be labelled so that people can make a choice about whether to buy these foods. The Parliament was firm on this demand three years ago and it is very disappointing that the Commission was not able to present a real solution.” UK MEP Linda McAvan said, “We have repeatedly said that citizens want to know what they eat...It does not make sense to ban cloning in the EU if we allow imports of offspring of cloned animals. The Commission should withdraw its proposal and put forward a better one.”

In February the European patent office granted a patent to Monsanto for its screening and selection process to identify wild soybeans from Asia and Australia adapted to give higher yields in different environmental conditions. Monsanto now has patents on hundreds of DNA sequences for natural genetic variations it will use for plant breeding. The patent applies in the US, Canada, China and South Africa, meaning these traits cannot be used by farmers or plant researchers to develop varieties with resilience to climate changes. No Patents on Seeds said, “This is nothing other than large-scale biopiracy. Monsanto is trying to control access to genetic information needed to develop soybeans adapted to climate change.”

“Sir, I am puzzled that Saharan sand can be blown thousands of miles, whereas GM pollen cannot possibly manage a few yards into the next field.”

Letter to the Editor of The Times

France

In March the Agriculture Ministry banned “the sale, use and cultivation” of GM maize MON810 for the third time to protect the environment. The High Court has rejected two previous bans. [TI 25, 31] In the run-up to the ban Agriculture Minister Stephane Le Foll said, “We need to give a legal framework to those countries that do not wish to see GM maize grown.” The European discussion on so-called opt-outs on GM cultivation continues, as does the authorisation of GM maize Pioneer1507.

UK

In February GeneWatch UK said UK company Oxitec failed to provide the required risk assessment in its notification of export of GM mosquito eggs to Panama. GeneWatch UK Director Dr Helen Wallace said, “Oxitec’s risk assessment is an essential part of the decision because it gives the company’s view on everything that could go wrong with the experiments. It is negligent of Oxitec to fail to do this risk assessment, which should meet European standards.” Dr Wallace added, “Public consultation on the risk assessment is essential so local people can be sure they know the pros and cons.”

In March the Council for Science and Technology announced it had written to Prime Minister Cameron urging better quality debate, decision-making and regulation of GMOs at UK and European level. Interestingly the announcement came after January’s first-ever UK export of oilseed rape to Turkey to meet the country’s strict zero tolerance policy for GMOs - the shortage of non-GM supplies globally led directly to this market opportunity for UK growers. Also in January the British Society of Plant Breeders backed calls to double

“The farmers who felt that they were lucky because they were ‘chosen’ for Bt brinjal are now feeling cheated, yet they cannot talk about it.”

Farida Akhter, Executive Director of UGING (Policy Research for Development Alternative) on the severe pest attack of the Bangladeshi Bt brinjal (aubergine) crop within weeks of planting

“As a former member of the editorial board of Food and Chemical Toxicology I feel ashamed about your recent decision to retract Séralini’s paper previously accepted for publication after a full review process which, I tend to believe, had been performed seriously as usual for a journal of high quality like FCT ... I also feel ashamed because your decision gives support to those who argue and even claim that scientific research (especially in biosciences) is less and less independent and more and more subject to industry pressure. Your decision, which can be interpreted as a will to eliminate scientific information that does not help supporting industrial interests is, in my view, unacceptable. If you and your colleagues of the editorial board had some questions about the conclusion of Séralini’s study, the only scientific attitude would have been to ask for additional studies. Retracting data creates questions and suspicion, and it is not a scientific attitude.”

Marcel Roberfroid in a letter to the Editor of Food and Chemical Toxicology [TI 32]

“There is no comparison between the [bottom-up] tinkering of selective breeding and the top-down engineering of taking a gene from an organism and putting it into another.”

Statistician Nassim Taleb on claims that humans have been modifying plants for years, calling claims that we risk famine if we reject GMOs “a deceitful strategy, no different from urging people to play Russian roulette in order to get out of poverty”

Small Farmer v. Monsanto: Breach of contract

In January a 38-year-old Chilean landless former GM farmer revealed that he had received CLP37 million (£40,000) in what is believed to be the first ever successful lawsuit against Monsanto for breach of contract. The amount is not sufficient to cover his CLP90 million debt, and the company stalled payment for some four months.

The farmer said that in 2008 Monsanto employees arrived on the land where he grew vegetables and told him satellite images suggested the location was ideal for GM maize cultivation. He was given GM seed, Roundup and land lease money, leaving him to purchase other inputs. In 2009 he was again given seed, but had to purchase the chemicals, and he was forced to use the company’s own machinery, which was expensive to run. He signed a contract stating that he could not sue the company but could only seek redress via the Chamber of Commerce. The Chamber of Commerce ruling found that Monsanto

failed to comply with its obligations to provide technical supervision services amounting to negligent breach of contract.

A spokesperson for Pesticide Action Network Chile said, “What happened to this farmer may be an example for hundreds of small farmers, seduced by big earnings and fair treatment promises by corporations which export GMO seeds... The great majority of the defrauded do not report and make themselves dependent on what the corporation offers, which becomes less every day. And there are not many alternatives for farmers, due to the lack of rural public policies or incentives that effectively favour agroecologic production. We must change this.”

The farmer said, “I am now a scholar of GMOs, I am learning through the internet, and I have found out about Monsanto and its criminal background... I just don’t want other farmers to go through what I did. I will never again sow GMOs.”

ROUNDUP *continued from p3*

public sector investment in UK plant science “to unlock the potential of the UK plant science sector by accelerating the transfer of research into practical application and building stronger links between the science base and industry”.

The call includes an appeal for increased

use of public/private partnerships and a call for policy makers to provide a regulatory framework for technologies like GM. Such a framework already exists, and how an increase in GM uptake will affect the UK’s opportunities to meet non-GM market demand remains to be seen.

The GM Freeze Campaign is calling on the Government for a Freeze on:

- The growing of genetically modified plants and the production of genetically modified farm animals for any commercial purpose.
- Imports of genetically modified foods, plants, farm crops and farm animals, and produce from genetically modified plants and animals.
- The patenting of genetic resources for food and farm crops.

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