

**GMO poplar trees set to be marketed: has the rot already set in before the
"Spring of the Environment"?**
**Greenpeace asks relevant Ministers not to follow the recommendation
of the Biosafety Council**

Brussels, 5th May - Greenpeace is deeply concerned about the favourable recommendation that has just been issued by the Biosafety Council in the dossier on genetically-modified poplar trees. Greenpeace does not question that field testing carries only a limited risk with the proviso that all precautionary measures be taken. Nevertheless, the risks for the environment and for biodiversity in the event that the trees are marketed would be considerable (1). The environmental organisation thus admonishes the Ministers in charge of the dossier, first and foremost Minister of Environment Magnette, to bear these long-term negative consequences in mind. Greenpeace asks the Ministers to apply the precautionary principle and not to undertake a course that may lead to the marketing of genetically-modified trees. Authorising field testing would be a bad start indeed to the "Spring of the Environment".

It is the VIB, the Vlaams Instituut voor Biotechnologie in Ghent that has submitted the request for the field testing of genetically-modified poplar trees to produce less lignin and aid the demand for agrofuels, often times put forward as the solution to the problem of climate changes. The Biosafety Council has put in its request and the dossier is now in the hands of Ministers Magnette and Onkelinx at Federal level and Minister Crevits at regional level. Greenpeace believes that the Ministers should oppose this field testing. Indeed, field testing is the first step in a process that leads to large-scale marketing. The introduction of genetically-modified trees in the environment poses considerable risk. Poplar trees reproduce sexually and vegetatively, which means that just a piece of branch or root can create a whole tree. If marketed, there is the inevitable risk of contamination, i.e. the gene flow and transfer of the trait from plantation trees to their wild related species. This transfer can thus be a threat to the poplars in our regions. What is more, given the essential role of lignin in wood (2), the weakening of natural species on account of lower lignin content is a cause for worry. It would appear that biotechnology was a foregone conclusion without assessing whether it was needed or what it would contribute: "Poplar trees are being modified so as to reduce their lignin content. And yet it has been shown in scientific articles that there is big natural variation of lignin in the trees (3)" says Natacha Adam, from Greenpeace's Sustainable Agriculture campaign, "An alternative to genetic modification, such as natural cross-breeding, does not seem to have been examined." The VIB supports field testing for the sake of the fight against climate change, and the poplar trees will be for the production of bioethanol. "If we want to act against climate change, we must first do something about our consumption patterns and reduce the amount of kilometres travelled", concludes Natacha Adam, "Let us not replace one environmental problem by another." Greenpeace is not opposed to scientific research, but it seriously questions the dissemination of genetically-modified organisms into the environment, also in the form of field testing. In the specific case of poplar trees, the objective of the experimentation (and the ensuing marketing) will not result in an improvement for the whole of society. Anything aiming to authorise marketing in the future will take us further and further away from an environmentally-friendly, sustainable agriculture that does not worsen climate change.

Greenpeace hopes that the Ministers will consider these elements as well when they will have to judge whether it is a good idea to authorise this field testing. If the Ministers authorise this field test, this authorisation would create a precedent, since no field test has been authorised in Belgium since 2002. In two weeks, the partners to the Convention on

Biodiversity are meeting in Bonn. The discussion in Bonn will a.o. Focus on transgenic trees. The European Parliament voted on 24th April a resolution demanding a moratorium on the release of transgenic trees, including field trials (4). Authorising field testing in Ghent, a few days before Magnette's launch of the Spring of the Environment's workshops on consumption and biodiversity, shows a lack of consistency and is tantamount to undermining the event's very foundations. Greenpeace should like to recall that, just like other environmental organisations, it put forward its objections during the public consultation (5).

For more information:

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Footnotes

1) The Biosafety Council mentions that the recommendation is valid under the strict conditions of the field trials and not in case of commercialisation.

2) http://www.bio-conseil.be/bac_advices.html

3) Lignin, along with cellulose, is one of wood's main components. It is indicative of a tree's cellular structure. It gives trees more solidity and provides the plant with a protective barrier against microbial attack.

4) Talukder, K., Low-lignin wood-a case-study, Nat. Biotechnol., vol.24, n°4, Pg 395- 396 (2006)

<http://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?pubRef=-//EP//TEXT+TA+P6-TA-2008-0179+0+DOC+XML+V0//EN>

5) Text of Greenpeace's complaint (French and dutch) available on

http://www.greenpeace.org/belgium/assets/binaries/gp_populier_bezwaarschrift

http://www.greenpeace.org/belgium/assets/binaries/gp_peuplier_plainte

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