



ETC Group
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Gene Giants Grab “Climate Genes” Amid Global Food Crisis, Biotech Companies are Exposed as Climate Change Profiteers

A report released today by Canadian-based civil society organization, ETC Group, reveals that the world’s largest seed and agrochemical corporations are stockpiling hundreds of monopoly patents on genes in plants that the companies will market as crops genetically engineered to withstand environmental stresses associated with climate change – including drought, heat, cold, floods, saline soils, and more. ETC Group’s report warns that – rather than a solution for confronting climate change – the promise of so-called “climate-ready” crops will be used to drive farmers and governments onto a proprietary biotech platform.

“In the face of climate chaos and a deepening world food crisis, the Gene Giants are gearing up for a PR offensive to re-brand themselves as climate saviours,” says Hope Shand, Research Director of ETC Group. “The companies hope to convince governments and reluctant consumers that genetic engineering is the essential adaptation strategy to insure agricultural productivity. Monopoly control of crop genes is a bad idea under any circumstances – but during a global food emergency with climate change looming – it’s unacceptable and must be challenged.”

According to ETC Group’s report, *Patenting “Climate Genes”...And Capturing the Climate Agenda*, Monsanto, BASF, DuPont, Syngenta, Bayer and Dow – along with biotech partners such as Mendel, Ceres, Evogene and more – have filed 532 patent documents on genes related to environmental stress tolerance at patent offices around the world. A list of 55 patent families (subsuming the 532 patent grants and applications) is appended to the report.

“The emphasis on genetically engineered, so-called ‘climate-ready’ crops will divert resources from affordable, decentralized approaches to cope with changing climate. Patents will concentrate corporate power, drive up costs, inhibit independent research and further undermine the rights of farmers to save and exchange seeds,” explains Shand. “Globally, the top 10 seed corporations already control 57% of commercial seed sales. This is a bid to capture as much of the rest of the market as possible.”

ETC Group calls on governments at the UN Biodiversity Convention (CBD) in Bonn, Germany (May 12-30) to suspend immediately all patents on so-called “climate ready” crop genes and traits. We also call for a full investigation, including the social and environmental impacts of these new, un-tested varieties. Further, governments meeting in Bonn should identify and eliminate policies such as restrictive seed laws, intellectual property regimes, contracts and trade agreements that are barriers to farmer plant breeding, seed-saving and exchange. “The world has already recognized that we are in

a food crisis and a climate ‘state of emergency,’” notes Pat Mooney, ETC Group’s Executive Director. “In this ‘state of emergency’ farmers must be given all the freedom and resources they need to get us through this crisis,” Mooney adds.

According to ETC Group, many of the patent claims are unprecedented in scope because a single patent may claim several different environmental (abiotic) stress traits. In addition, some patent claims extend not just to abiotic stress tolerance in a single engineered plant species – but also to a substantially similar genetic sequence in virtually *all* engineered food crops. The corporate grab extends beyond the U.S. and Europe. Patent offices in major food producing countries such as Argentina, Australia, Brazil, Canada, China, Mexico and South Africa are also swamped with patent filings. Monsanto (the world’s largest seed company) and BASF (the world’s largest chemical firm) have entered into a colossal \$1.5 billion partnership to engineer stress tolerant plants. “Together,” adds Kathy Jo Wetter of ETC Group, “the two companies account for nearly half of the patent families related to engineered stress tolerance identified by ETC Group. If we include their smaller biotech partners like Ceres and Mendel, Monsanto and BASF have a part in almost two-thirds of the so-called ‘climate-ready’ germplasm.”

“Technological silver bullets – especially patented ones – will not provide the adaptation strategies that small farmers need to survive in the face of climate change,” says ETC Group’s Jim Thomas. Climate scientists predict that marginalized farming communities in the global South – those who have contributed least to global greenhouse emissions – are among the most severely threatened by climate chaos created by the world’s richest countries.

“The South is already being trampled by the North’s super-sized carbon footprint. Will farming communities now be stampeded by the Gene Giants’ climate change profiteering?” asks Thomas.

For the Gene Giants, the focus on “climate genes” is a golden opportunity to push genetically engineered crops as “green” and climate-friendly. Biotech seeds will no longer be marketed as a choice, but as a necessity. Given the state of emergency in food and agriculture, governments will be pressured to overlook biosafety regulations and to accept dangerous technologies such as Terminator that have been rejected by the international community. (Despite a U.N. moratorium on Terminator seeds, the biotech industry argues that genetic seed sterilization will make biotech crops safer by containing gene flow from engineered crops and trees.)

“There’s a danger that governments will give corporate Gene Giants *carte blanche* to use genetically engineered, ‘climate-ready’ Terminator seeds as the best shot and last resort for surviving climate change,” adds ETC’s Kathy Jo Wetter, “rather than fund alternative research that supports breeding work with under-utilized crops, and encourage farm-based conservation, breeding and exchange of germplasm.”

The Secretary-General of the United Nations hopes to have a comprehensive plan to tackle the global food crisis by the beginning of June when an emergency meeting of prime ministers, agriculture ministers, and the heads of major agencies will meet in Rome June 3-5. Pat Mooney of ETC Group points out that indigenous and local farming communities have developed, managed and conserved crop diversity for generations. “Farmers’ leadership in developing strategies for climate change survival and adaptation must be recognized, strengthened and protected by governments,” said Mooney, who will be attending the conference.

Note to editors: Upcoming United Nations meetings include the Ninth Conference of the Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity (12-30 May) in Bonn, Germany followed by the UN and FAO High-Level Conference on World Food Security, Climate Change and Bioenergy in Rome (3-5 June 2008).

ETC Group's report, including a table listing over 500 patent applications and patents (55 patent families) on climate-related genes and traits is available here:
<http://www.etcgroup.org>

For further information:

Hope Shand and Kathy Jo Wetter, ETC Group (USA) hope@etcgroup.org
kjo@etcgroup.org
+1 919 960-5767 (office)
mobile: +1 919 428-3740

Jim Thomas, ETC Group (Canada) jim@etcgroup.org
+1 514 6674932 (office) or +1 514 516-5759 (mobile)

Silvia Ribeiro, ETC Group (Mexico) silvia@etcgroup.org
+52 5555 6326 64

Pat Mooney, ETC Group (Ottawa, Canada) etc@etcgroup.org
+1 613 241-2267