



News Release
Monday, January 10, 2005
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Syngenta Claims Multi-Genome Monopoly

ETC Group's first Communiqué of 2005 focuses on Syngenta, the global gene giant that ranks first in agrochemicals and third in seeds. Syngenta has a patent pending in 115 countries that, if approved, would give it a multi-genome monopoly over at least 40 plant species.

Calling Syngenta's patent claims "an unprecedented bid for multi-genome monopoly," ETC Group (pronounced "*et cetera*") has written to the European Patent Office (EPO), the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO) and the US Patent and Trademark Office (USPTO) demanding that the patents be rejected. Simultaneously, ETC Group has written to the Director-General of FAO (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations) and to the Chair of the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR) asking them to oppose Syngenta's applications, "on the grounds that they represent a direct threat to world food security and an attack on public agricultural research," said ETC Group's Research Director, Hope Shand.

In a *Communiqué* released today, ETC Group reveals how Syngenta's public image as the "nice" multinational belies its actual activities. "No more 'Mr. Nice Guy,'" Kathy Jo Wetter at ETC's US office insists, "Syngenta is muscling its way toward control of dozens of plant species even as it appears to make nice with FAO and CGIAR as the good guy Gene Giant. If Syngenta is granted this patent, it will make Monsanto look like Santa Claus."

Syngenta's 323-page application, *WO03000904A2/3* claims monopoly control of DNA that regulates flowering development, flower formation, whole plant architecture and flower timing in rice – in up to 115 countries. But the claims are not limited to vital rice gene sequences. According to a study prepared by Dr. Paul Oldham at Lancaster University (UK), the scope of this massive patent application is virtually limitless – extending to flowering plants in general, including those not yet classified by taxonomists. Syngenta's claims extend to key gene sequences of 23 major food crops annexed to the FAO Treaty on Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture. "If all its claims are approved," says Silvia Ribeiro in ETC's Mexico office, "FAO's seed treaty will be virtually useless." Dr. Oldham's analysis is available on the Internet: <http://www.cesagen.lancs.ac.uk/docs/genomics-final.doc>

Researchers are just weeks away from completing a polished sequence of the rice genome. This DNA blueprint of the crop that feeds half the world's people is also the basis for identifying similar genetic traits in other flowering plants. "Effectively," says Kathy Jo Wetter, "the completed rice map provides a template for most of the world's major food crops. Syngenta is arguing that since it can identify certain gene sequences in rice, it can monopolize the same sequences when they turn up in other species."

Syngenta's involvement with rice genome research has been convoluted and controversial. Initially, the company attempted to withhold its genomic research from the public domain and only surrendered some information after the scientific community – including two Nobel laureates – criticized Syngenta publicly. Even as the company won favorable publicity for donating some data, it was simultaneously applying for its multi-genome patent. The company has also had a sticky history with genetically modified Golden Rice – the supposedly vitamin A-rich rice created through public funds and then surrendered to the company's predecessor in order to avoid patent disputes. On the eve of World Food Day last October, Syngenta donated patent licenses to the Golden Rice Humanitarian Board. Syngenta Foundation – a company-dominated private foundation in Switzerland – stirred more controversy and embarrassment when it was invited to become a full member of the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR).

“While the Genome Giant congratulates itself for donating rice germplasm and information to public researchers, its lawyers are working overtime to monopolize rice resources,” says ETC's Silvia Ribeiro.

ETC Group is calling upon FAO and CGIAR to take the unusual step of challenging the patent application prior to its determination by patent examiners. “The patent system is heavily biased in favor of a patent holder,” explains Hope Shand. “If we don't block this patent and it is approved with all its claims it will take years – possibly more than a decade – to have it rescinded. The litigation costs will be huge... It is urgent that FAO and CGIAR defend world food security and protect the public good now before the monopoly is granted.”

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The Action Group on Erosion, Technology and Concentration, formerly RAFI, is an international civil society organization headquartered in Canada. The ETC group is dedicated to the advancement of cultural and ecological diversity and human rights. www.etcgroup.org. The ETC group is also a member of the Community Biodiversity Development and Conservation Programme (CBDC). The CBDC is a collaborative experimental initiative involving civil society organizations and public research institutions in 14 countries. The CBDC is dedicated to the exploration of community-directed programmes to strengthen the conservation and enhancement of agricultural biodiversity. The CBDC website is www.cbdcprogram.org