

Taking Care of Business The CGIAR and GM contamination

In a remarkable departure from its role as a public science network, the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR) is huddling with the biotech industry (including Monsanto and DuPont) to craft a policy response to the unwelcome and ongoing spread of DNA from genetically modified plants to farmers' varieties. The meeting begins in Rome on Monday and comes three years after scientists first confirmed GM contamination in Mexico's maize crop – and two and a half years after farmers' organizations and their civil society allies called upon CGIAR and the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) to take action. Farmers' organizations are not invited to the meeting.

[Note: The world's most important collections of seeds, the vast majority of which were collected from farming communities in the South, are maintained in a network of 16 gene banks overseen by the CGIAR. In 1994, the FAO and CGIAR signed agreements placing most of the seed collections under the auspices of the United Nations. At the meeting next Monday, CGIAR will examine the implications of GM contamination for gene bank collections it holds in trust for the international community. Officially, the meeting is known as "The development of CGIAR policies to address the possibility of adventitious presence of transgenes in CGIAR *ex situ* collections."]



Policy workshop: Beginning next Monday in Rome, 30 invited participants from the biotech industry and national and international agricultural research institutes will sit down for 2.5 days to hammer out a strategic policy response to the ballooning problem of worldwide GM contamination.

The meeting will hear formally from government institutes such as EMBRAPA in Brazil, CGEN in Netherlands and the USDA. The agenda also calls for presentations from three industry representatives including Monsanto and DuPont – the world's two largest seed corporations.

Missing from the speakers list are the representatives of farmers' organizations, South government policymakers, development agencies, and civil society organizations (CSOs) familiar with the issues. FAO is invited but not offered a place on the agenda. The workshop organizers defend their limited invitation list stressing the "technical" nature of the discussion although the invitation states that, "The emphasis of the workshop should be on the policy and economic-related implications of different approaches to the issue, with a lesser focus on potential scientific, technical means." The timetable following the battery of industry statements concentrates on "points of agreement" and "controversial issues" as CGIAR and its national scientific partners look for policy recommendations. (*CGIAR's agenda and workshop description, as received Aug. 20, are posted as PDF documents on ETC Group's website.*)

Paternalist turned partner-predator? "The CGIAR has mandated itself to use science for 'poverty alleviation' but now seems to be more concerned with helping the agbiotech industry get through the crisis created by their own sloppy science," says Pat Mooney of the Canadian-based ETC Group. "The CGIAR network has always had a paternalistic approach to farmers and their organizations," Mooney adds, "but this is the first time we have known them – as an international consortium of public sector scientists – to side so thoroughly with industry. It is farmers' seeds that are being contaminated. Industry's GM crops are causing the contamination. Whose business is the CGIAR taking care of?"

The workshop was proposed by the CGIAR's Genetic Resources Policy Committee in February. The invitation states that a maximum of 30 invitees include "...representatives from (most affected) IARCs, NARS and private companies, and experts." Belatedly recognizing that news of the meeting would leak out, organizers opined earlier in the summer that they might convene an electronic conference to appease stakeholders not invited to the meeting. As the summer wore on, however, and as the reaction to FAO's May report on agricultural biotechnology evoked unprecedented outrage among farmers, CGIAR apparently decided to keep the meeting as low-key as possible. Organizations of small farmers such as La Via Campesina are being shut out. One farmer who sits on a CGIAR committee in a private capacity may attend the final half-day of the workshop along with the rest of the committee – but has not (perhaps until now?) been asked to make a presentation.

Stakeholders and Steak-eaters: "Both from a political and from a scientific point of view, the organizers have been breathtakingly stupid," says Silvia Ribeiro of ETC's Mexico office, "a meeting between the CGIAR and industry was bound to become known and widely-resented. It is also profoundly insulting that the CGIAR – that claims to work with and for farmers – does not realize that farmers' organizations have a critical perspective on the GM contamination issue that cannot be ignored. The CGIAR is seeking policy advice from the culprits and not the victims. The decision not to invite farmers' organizations and CSOs was political," Ribeiro concludes.

"This workshop is a case study in bad science," argues Hope Shand of ETC in the USA. "With GM contamination," Shand adds, "the stakeholders are the farmers whose very lives and livelihoods depend on their seed. The companies do not have their lives at stake and they're the ones who caused the contamination. Monsanto is a steak-eater not a stakeholder!"

Malicious presence: "The language of the agenda pretty well says it all," Pat Mooney notes. "Farmers and civil society organizations typically refer to the unwanted intrusion of transgenes into farmers' fields as 'contamination.' Industry refuses to use the term and CGIAR has gone along with them. They prefer 'adventitious presence,' which means unintended and unavoidable presence and, ironically, even sounds a bit like 'advantageous.' By adopting language manufactured by industry spin doctors, CGIAR has made it clear whose side it is on."

Contamination controversy: The CG system can't claim that it didn't know farmers and civil society were both well-informed and alarmed about GM contamination – especially in Third World centres of genetic diversity.

- In February 2002, 144 civil society organizations from 40 countries signed an open letter to the Director-General of FAO and the Chair of the CGIAR asking them to take up the issue of GM contamination; to advise on how future contamination could be monitored and prevented; to explore the feasibility of decontamination; to consider the impact of contamination on farmers' varieties and their livelihoods; to review the protocols for gene bank collections, grow-outs and exchange; and to examine the complications brought about by intellectual property. CGIAR replied that no specific action was required. FAO acknowledged in March 2002 that the situation was serious and requested that CIMMYT investigate..

<http://www.foodfirst.org/progs/global/ge/jointstatement2002.html>

- A second letter, signed by 302 CSOs from 56 countries was sent to the Government of Mexico, FAO and CGIAR in November 2003.

<http://www.peoplesfoodsovereignty.org/statements/new/03.htm>

- In June this year, more than 650 civil society organizations responded to FAO's contentious report on agricultural biotechnology with yet another letter of protest – which specifically mentions GM contamination in Third World centres of crop diversity.

<http://www.grain.org/nfg/?id=180>

Reforms needed: Last week, CGIAR scrambled to invite a representative of the Ottawa, Canada-based ETC Group to attend the Rome meeting. With barely a week's notice, ETC shot back a sharp "no" and roundly criticized the organizers for failing to involve farmers' organizations. "We're not a farmers' movement," Hope Shand says, "and we certainly do not speak for them."

ETC Group believes the workshop should be cancelled and then convened under other auspices with the full participation of farmers' organizations on a newly formed planning committee. However, since the gathering begins Monday, cancellation is unlikely. "The workshop should be downgraded to a meeting to discuss a future workshop that will engage the real stakeholders from farmers to South governments," Pat Mooney proposes. "Next week's meeting should be a meeting of FAO, CGIAR, and national public sector institutes only. The industry people should be dis-invited immediately. It is simply unacceptable for CGIAR to convene a GM policy meeting with the private sector and without civil society or governments."

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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

Attachments:

- Workshop agenda as of August 20th;
- Workshop description received August 20th

Genetic Resources Policy Committee (GRPC) and the Science Council of the CGIAR

Workshop on “The development of CGIAR policies to address the possibility of adventitious presence of transgenes in CGIAR *ex situ* collections”

IPGRI Headquarters, 30 August – 1 September, 2004

Monday, 30 August		
<i>Chair of the Morning Session: Carl-Gustaf Thornstrom</i>		
09:00 – 09:15	Welcome	Emile Frison, IPGRI; Mike Gale, Science Council; Carlos Correa, University of Buenos Aires
09:15 – 9:45	Participants introduction	
9:45 – 10:15	Objectives of the workshop	Carlos Correa
10.15 – 10:45	Coffee break	
10:45 – 12:05	Institutional perspectives - EMBRAPA - ICAR - NCGRP - Wageningen University	Luciano Nass, EMBRAPA; S.P. Tiwari, ICAR; David Ellis, National Center for Genetic Resources Preservation; Bert Visser, Wageningen University.
12:05 – 12:25	CIMMYT experience	Dave Hoisington, CIMMYT
12:25 - 1:00	Discussion	
1:00 – 2:00	Lunch	
<i>Chair of the Afternoon Session: Juan Restrepo</i>		
2:00 – 2:30	Results of survey on genebanks practices regarding GMOs	Maria José Amstalden Sampaio, EMBRAPA; Michael Halewood, IPGRI.
2:30 - 2:50	Discussion	
2:50– 3:20	Coffee break	
3:20 – 4:00	Guidelines and/or codes of practice on adventitious presence of transgenes in <i>ex situ</i> collections	David Ellis, USDA (to be confirmed); Dr Apostolatus EC-DG research (to be confirmed).
4:00 - 4:15	Discussion	
4:15 – 4:45	Costs associated with testing the adventitious presence of transgenes in <i>ex situ</i> collections	David Ellis, USDA; Gert Poulsen; Nordic Gene Bank.
4:45 – 5:05	Discussion	
8:00	<i>Dinner in a restaurant in Rome</i>	

Tuesday, 31 August		
09:00 – 10:00	Private sector perspective	Chair: Juan Restrepo Roger Krueger, Monsanto; Arlo Thompson, Pioneer Hi-Bred; Francois Burgaud, European Seed Association.
10:00 – 10:15	Discussion	
<i>Facilitator: Willy De Greef</i>		
10:15 – 11:15	Identification of: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Points of agreement 2. Controversial issues 3. Need for additional information and how to get it 	
11:15 – 11:45	Coffee break	
11:45 – 12:45	Identification of: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Points of agreement 2. Controversial issues 3. Need for additional information and how to get it 	
12:45 – 1:45	Lunch	
1:45 – 4:00	Continued	
4:00 – 4:30	Coffee break	
4:30 – 5:30	Continued	

Wednesday, 1 September		
<i>Facilitator: Willy De Greef</i>		
9:00 – 10:30	Formulation of conclusions	
10:30 – 11:00	Coffee break	
11:00 – 1:00	Wrap-up	
1:00 – 2:00	Lunch	

(April 30, 04 draft)

Workshop on GMOs and *ex situ* collections in the CGIAR

The expanding use of transgenic seed world-wide raises issues about the presence of genetically modified materials in the *ex situ* germplasm collections held by International Agricultural Research Centres (IARCs) of the CGIAR and NARS. Recent events in Mexico with Bt-corn and suspected presence of transgenes in farmer varieties and CIMMYT genebank collections illustrates new challenges concerning tracing adventitious introgression of transgenes into accessions in *ex situ* collections. Some collection curators report being asked for guarantees about the 'integrity' of their collections as a precondition for distribution, thereby raising questions about how far genebanks should go to identify the presence of transgenes in their accessions and what further efforts they should undertake to eliminate the possibility of such 'presence'. There is a growing need for CG-Centers to address these issues, and to establish consistent, harmonious and scientifically-based policies regarding the management of such materials.

During its 15th meeting in Rome in February 2004, the Genetic Resources Policy Committee (GRPC) agreed to organize a workshop bringing together different stakeholders from within and outside the CGIAR to explore ways and means to handle GM materials, with the goal of working towards a common System-wide approach. GRPC will communicate to Centres that it has started to consider this issue and that, given the significant implications for other Centres and NARS, policies on this matter should be adopted after further investigation/consideration on a system-wide basis.

The workshop (2.5 days, 30 August to September 1, 2004) should focus on the following issues:

- Brief overview of present procedures and policies at CG-Centers and a representative sampling of national publicly-held collections and privately-held collections in handling materials that may contain transgenes
- Brief overview of EU, USA and other codes of practice on adventitious DNA
- Identification of critical issues in *ex situ* germplasm management involving materials potentially subject to adventitious introgression of transgenes

- Cost estimates and procedures for carrying out screening and safe depositing in *ex situ* collections
- Procedures for dissemination of materials to NARS and other clients taking into account the possibility of adventitious introgression of transgenes into those materials
- Passport information including phytosanitary certificate and the (im)possibility of a GM-free guaranty
- Identification of basic elements for a common CG Center strategy and policy to deal with the issue of the possibility of transgenes introgressed into accessions of IARC *ex situ* collections
- Investigation of technical aspects and policy related consequences of conserving transgenic varieties in genebanks

As CIMMYT has already done some work in this area, it should be invited to make a presentation on their work to date. In addition, a few representatives from NARS should make presentations at the workshop, given the likely 'spill over' effect on NARS if and when CG Centers adopt policies, thereby setting precedents that NARS will likely be pressured to follow. Experts from both northern and southern countries will be invited to address specific aspects. The emphasis of the workshop should be on the policy and economic-related implications of different approaches to the issue, with a lesser focus on potential scientific, technical means. The Science Council should also be invited to attend and provide technical backstopping with respect to scientific issues that will probably be raised.

Workshop details:

Duration: 2.5 days (The GRPC will join the last half day of the meeting on September 1, 2002)

Location: IPGRI, Rome

Participants: 30 maximum including representatives from (most affected) IARCs, NARS and private companies, and experts

Given that participation at the meeting of all interested participants from both inside and outside the CGIAR may not be possible in order to keep the meeting to a reasonable size, it may be advisable to engage a wider range of participants in pre-conference, on-line discussions of the issue.