

Unlike other GE trees, such as poplar and pine, GE American chestnuts are being designed with the express intent of releasing them into wild forests. And in order for them to survive in a forest setting, they must be allowed to cross with native American chestnuts. The impacts of the uncontained and uncontrollable contamination of native forests with genetically engineered American chestnuts are not being independently studied. The USDA is relying on “The fox to guard the henhouse,” and gave half a million dollars to GE chestnut researchers at ESF to evaluate the environmental impacts of the GE American chestnuts.

At the American Chestnut Foundation annual meeting in Washington, DC in October, lead researcher William Powell stated that he hopes to “get these things out there as quick as possible,” a position hardly compatible with a thorough evaluation of their impacts. If ultimately approved for unregulated release into the environment, GE American chestnuts will open the door for approval of other genetically engineered versions of native trees including poplars and pines, that also threaten to irreversibly contaminate native forests with potentially devastating unnatural traits such as every cell of the tree containing a pesticide.

Over all, the year 2013 has seen a major surge in activity around GE trees. Beginning in February the USDA announced they were taking public comments on a peti-

tion by ArborGen requesting permission to commercially release their freeze tolerant eucalyptus trees, which could then be planted by the hundreds of millions across seven U.S. Southern states (from South Carolina to Texas), far outside of their natural range.

Eucalyptus trees, native to Australia, are classified as invasive in Florida, California and Hawaii. They are also known to be highly flammable. Non-native eucalyptus trees fueled the 1991 Oakland firestorm that burned thousands of homes and killed 25 people. These traits have led GE eucalyptus trees to be nicknamed ‘flammable kudzu’ and ‘living firecrackers.’

Even the U.S. Forest Service has reported concerns that GE eucalyptus trees planted in the U.S. South would use twice the water of native forests in the same region. In South Africa and Chile eucalyptus plantations are known for drying up ground water and causing or worsening droughts and displacing local populations.

Enabling them to grow in colder climates will spread these disastrous traits to new bioregions, not just in the U.S., but globally.

For these and other reasons, when the USDA released ArborGen’s petition for public comment in February, Global Justice Ecology Project joined forces with the Center for Food Safety, Center for Biological Diversity, Dogwood Alliance and others to solicit as many public comments as possible.

Ultimately, the 60 day comment period saw over 37,000 comments submitted opposing ArborGen’s request to commercialize GE eucalyptus trees, versus only 4 comments in favor—a ratio of nearly 10,000 to one.

One month after the comment period ended, the International Union of Forest Research Organizations held its Tree Biotechnology 2013 conference in Asheville, NC. This event became a major focal point for opposition to this potentially disastrous technology.

From the May 26th to June 1st, hundreds of activists from across the country converged on Asheville to protest the industry conference. The conference was disrupted or protested by activists even before it began and almost every day it took place.

On May 25th, more than 1,000 people joined the March Against Monsanto in Asheville, with a vocal contingent protesting GE trees. On May 28th, the largest ever protest against GE trees took place as hundreds of people marched through the streets and rallied outside the conference hotel. A conference field trip on May 29th was cancelled due to the threat of protests. And on May 30th, three activists were arrested while blocking a conference bus headed to an exclusive dinner at the Biltmore Estate—known as the birthplace of modern industrial forestry.

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The effort to stop GE eucalyptus trees really got going in 2010, however, when the USDA approved test plots across seven southern states including over a quarter of a million trees. This led to a lawsuit by Global Justice Ecology Project, Center for Food Safety, Center for Biological Diversity, Sierra Club and Dogwood Alliance.

“GE tree company ArborGen has publicly stated that they want to be the next Monsanto,” stated Tom Llewellyn of the REAL Cooperative. “Many Monsanto employees have gone to work at ArborGen, including many of their executive staff. Monsanto was even an early partner in the forest biotechnology venture that later became ArborGen.”

The development of GE trees for the production of electricity and liquid fuel is also being opposed due to the dramatic increases in deforestation and displacement of forest dependent peoples it will cause around the world.

“We know that GE trees will be a disaster for forests and biodiversity,” said Asheville, NC-based Laura Sorensen, one of the demonstrators arrested for disrupting the Tree Biotechnology conference last May. “With predictions of worsening extreme weather in our region due to climate change, the last thing we need is highly flammable and invasive plantations of water-hungry eucalyptus trees that will only make the problem worse. I see no future in this for my grandchildren.”



Rebecca Goodman and John Peck at a Ban Monsanto Rally at Wisconsin State Capitol.

Biologist Dr. Rachel Smolker, a member of the Steering Committee of the Campaign to STOP GE Trees further points out, “GE food crops have already taught us some lessons about unanticipated problems...including failure of engineered traits to be expressed consistently, cross-contamination with wild relatives and evolution of resistant weeds and pests. Nature is messy and unpredictable. Things do not happen ‘out there’ as they do in test tubes in sterile-controlled laboratory settings. Genetic manipulation of trees raises particular problems because trees live for a long time, undergo many physiological changes over their life span, and respond to changes in the environment. Once they run amok, there will be no chance of going back.”

Keith Brunner, of Global Justice Ecology Project, one of the members of this fall’s organizing tour against GE trees explained its importance. “The U.S. South is on

the front lines of the fight to stop GE trees. ArborGen wants their GE eucalyptus trees growing in plantations across the region, but GE trees are not yet legal. This is still one fight we can win—one disaster we can stop before it’s too late. And if we stop them here, we can prevent the disaster of GE trees from being exported around the world.”

About the negative reaction of university campuses in Florida, Ruddy Turnstone, of Everglades Earth First! points out, “with so much activity building to stop genetically engineered trees, it is no surprise that industry is reacting. The GE trees event cancellation at the University of Florida in late-October was a pathetic attempt to stifle growing dissent against GE trees by an industry which is flailing amid major public opposition. Last April, the USDA received comments at the rate of nearly 10,000 to one opposing GE trees.

One month later, the largest ever protest against GE trees was held at an industry conference in Asheville, NC. Opposition is building and the GE trees industry is clearly nervous about it.” In September, the Center for Food Safety put out a new report detailing these potential threats titled, “Genetically Engineered Trees: The New Frontier of Biotechnology.” You can find this report on their website at centerforfoodsafety.org.

To get more involved in the Campaign to STOP GE Trees, go to nogetrees.org