

GeneWatch UK PRESS RELEASE

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International coalition of public interest groups intervenes in WTO GM dispute: WTO must not act as stooge of the biotech industry

Today, a coalition of 15 leading public interest groups (listed at the end of this press release), spanning Europe, North and South America and Asia, filed an amicus curiae (or 'friend of the court') brief (1) with the World Trade Organisation. The Amicus Coalition includes public interest, environmental and legal organisations.

The US, Canada and Argentina are challenging the European Union over its *de facto* moratorium on the approval of genetically modified (GM) foods and crops. Next week, the WTO will hold the first oral hearing in the case. These countries argue that the European Union has violated WTO Agreements – as the largest producers of GM crops they have the most to lose from restrictions on trade in GM food and crops (2). The coalition believes that the WTO should reject the challenge because it undermines countries' choice and capacity to decide how they want to deal with GM crops and foods.

If the European Union loses the case there could be serious consequences:

- The European Union will have to pay compensation and/or trade sanctions may be imposed against it.
- The European Union and other countries might feel unable to implement appropriate measures to protect the health of people and the environment from GM products and effectively be forced to accept GM foods and crops.
- The WTO will be seen as the enforcer of the interests of global corporations at the expense of people and the environment.

Dr Sue Mayer, Director of GeneWatch UK said, "The science of GM crops and foods is very uncertain. The potential for serious and irreversible risks to the environment and human health remains. The ownership and control of the technology by multi-national corporations means it does not meet the needs of the poor and hungry. We believe countries should be able to decide their own level of protection from the risks of GM crops and food, free from bullying by the GM exporting countries. The WTO must not let itself be used as the stooge of the biotech industry when it considers this case".

Carrie Stebbings, Coordinator of the Five Year Freeze said, "People in Europe, like in many other parts of the world, want a cautious approach to GM crops and food. They also want choice. Europe has been revising its regulations and undertaking scientific research to inform its decisions. The size and breadth of this coalition reveals the depth of feeling about GM crops and foods worldwide. If Europe loses, many smaller countries will feel unable to make the choices they wish and be bullied into biotech crops. It would cause considerable anger worldwide and a backlash against the WTO".

Dr Mark Avery, Director of Conservation at the RSPB said: "The harmful impacts on farmland birds, such as skylarks, of growing these GM crops would not have been assessed if the EU had been forced to accept GM crops. There is no question that GM

crops can harm wildlife - that was proved conclusively in the farm scale trials, which were backed by the British government."

Charlie Kronick of Greenpeace added: "It's not the job of the WTO to promote GM foods on behalf of the Bush administration and the GM industry. This isn't about free trade, it's about forced trade, and more specifically about the U.S. trying to force smaller countries to accept GM crops whether they like it or not. Our submission to the panel highlights the enormous potential problems posed by GM crops. We're telling the WTO that the U.S. complaint is designed to scare countries around the world into toeing the line."

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Members of the WTO GM amicus coalition:

GeneWatch UK ; Foundation for International Environmental Law and Development (FIELD); Five Year Freeze (UK); Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB); The Center for Food Safety (USA); Council of Canadians; Polaris Institute (Canada); Grupo de Reflexión Rural Argentina; Center for Human Rights and the Environment (CEDHA - Argentina); Gene Campaign (India); Forum for Biotechnology and Food Security (India); Fundación Sociedades Sustentables (Chile); Greenpeace International; Californians for GE-Free Agriculture; International Forum on Globalisation

Notes to editors:

1. An amicus curiae brief is information supplied as a 'friend of the court'. The full brief and background information is available in advance to journalists on <http://www.genewatch.org/WTO.htm>. Ongoing information is available on www.genewatch.org/WTO/WTO_default.htm

2. A three person Panel of trade experts has been appointed to adjudicate the three disputes as a single panel (the 'WTO GM dispute'). The parties will have filed their submissions by the end of May 2004, and the first oral hearing is expected on 2nd June. A decision is expected in the latter part of 2004, which may be followed by an appeal on points of law to the Appellate Body of the WTO.

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