

GM Terminator Seeds – Poor Farmers Could Face Billions of Dollars in extra Seed Bills

The first estimates of the costs of GM terminator technology to farmers around the world have been released as the debate about the controversial sterile seed technology intensifies at the Convention on Biodiversity (CBD) talks in Brazil (March 22nd).

The estimates, prepared by civil society organisation ETC Group in cooperation with farm organisations, show that if Terminator was commercialised and displaced all farm saved seed the extra seed costs for farmers in just seven countries could easily exceed \$1.2 billion per year - equivalent to 23% of the UK's £5.3 million aid budget. Examples of the extra costs to replace farm saved seed used for major crops include:

- Soya beans in Brazil 70% of the planted area – additional costs- \$407m/year.
- Wheat in Pakistan 88% of the planted area – additional costs \$191m/year.
- Rice in the Philippines 59% of the planted area – additional costs \$172m/year.

If Terminator technology were applied over time to all the seed lines around the world, the costs to farmers of buying fresh seed annually would be many billions of dollars. Even Canadian wheat farmers, whose government is one of the leading proponents of Terminator at the CBD, could be stung with an annual bill of US\$85 million dollars.

Biotech companies have made no secret of their plans to maximise their share of the global seed market. The global farm saved seed market is potentially huge and even in the UK it is estimated that between 10 and 40% of oilseed rape seed is saved each year. In Argentina, where 90% of soya is now GM, farmers continued the practice of seed saving when GM soya was introduced and Monsanto has made retrospective attempts through the courts to re-coup its lost sales from European importers. Companies are likely to want to circumvent such GM seed saving with the use of Terminator technology.

The issue of Terminator technology is being negotiated at the United Nations Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), meeting in Curitiba, Brazil. Terminator crops (or GURTS - genetic use restriction technologies) are genetically modified to create sterile seeds at harvest so that farmers must buy new seed every season. Over 500 organisations around the world have joined the Ban Terminator campaign to prevent the current CBD decision which placed a global moratorium on outdoor testing or commercial growing of Terminator crops before global socio-economic assessments had been completed, being weakened at this week's talks.

A small group of industrialised nations, Canada, New Zealand, Australia and the UK (supported on the sidelines by the US which is not a member of the CBD) promoted "case by case risk assessment" for Terminator Technology. This "case by case" clause would open the door to field testing and eventual commercialisation of sterile seed technology ahead of an understanding of the socio-economic impact on the 1.4 billion people who depend on farm saved seeds for their food security and livelihoods. The ETC data is the first attempt to be published to assess the cumulative impact of hundreds of terminator seeds lines around the world.

Roberto Requião, the Governor of Brazil's Paraná state, opened the CBD conference on Monday with a strong condemnation of Terminator: "Suicide seeds are the next step in the transnational industry's strategy to control the production and commercial use of seeds" Requião told the opening plenary of 3000 delegates "It is one more step by transnational industry to obtain total control over the production of the grain."

Commenting for the UK Terminator Alliance, Pete Riley said: "No wonder the multinational seed industry is so keen to win 'case by case' assessment of Terminator. If they can undermine the existing moratorium they will use Terminator as a technology platform for all commercial seeds and extract billions of extra dollars from farmers. The UK government and others backing the case by case approach need to listen hard to Southern voices on this vital issue and maintain the moratorium".