

May 15, 2008

To: Hon. John Baird, Minister of the Environment, Canada

RE: Open letter signed by 47 Canadian groups, requesting the Canadian Government, at the COP9 meeting of the United Nations Convention on Biological Diversity May 19-30 2008, support other governments in establishing a moratorium on the field testing, planting and commercial release of genetically engineered trees.

The undersigned, members of organizations, associations and community groups from across Canada, wish to express in this letter our grave concerns about the field testing of genetically engineered (GE) trees in Canada as well as our concerns about field testing in other countries and the threat of commercial approvals for transgenic trees.

Firstly, we would like to state our concern about the field-testing of GE trees in Canada. Despite government regulation intended to prevent contamination, these open-air trials pose serious threats to forest ecosystems in Canada.

Secondly, we would like to state our objection to the use of public funds to field test genetically engineered trees, as has been undertaken by the Canadian Forest Service, Natural Resources Canada, at government research stations.

Thirdly, we would like to state our concern about ongoing field tests in other countries as well as the prospects of commercial use of transgenic trees.

Timber and biotechnology corporations are developing GE trees for future production of paper and biofuels.

The release of genetically engineered trees poses a serious threat to Canadian and global forest ecosystems and forest biodiversity.

Pollen from GE trees can travel hundreds of miles (1200 kilometers observed for pine from south-east US to eastern Canada) and the risks of irreversible contamination are therefore very high.

Canada's forest sector is an important part of our economy that could be negatively affected by contamination from GE trees.

Forests fulfill many diverse community needs. For example, forest-based foods are important to the health, livelihoods and cultures of Aboriginal peoples, 80% of whom are in forested areas.

The field-testing and commercialization of insect resistant (Bt) trees, toxic to the Lepidoptera class of insects, will, as recent studies indicate, harm soil and aquatic ecosystems as well as effect non-target insects and the birds and other organisms that feed on them, with consequent impacts on the food chain of local fauna.

The genetic engineering of trees for cold tolerance threatens to expand the environmental and social impacts of plantations into colder regions and higher altitudes. The spread of cold-tolerant traits would also bring the threat of new invasive species.

The commercialization of herbicide tolerant trees will only add to the use of pesticides in tree plantations and the accompanying serious environmental impacts, including the destruction of local flora and impacts on human health.

Of particular concern is the extensive research being carried out to develop trees with reduced or modified lignin for the production of cellulosic biofuels. Lignin is an important structural polymer (it helps trees stand) that is significant in the defense against insects and disease as well as in water conductivity through the plant. Low-lignin trees would be more susceptible to disease and pests and would be vulnerable in windstorms. The spread of low-lignin trees and their genes via seed and pollen to forests could be devastating.

Already native forests in countries around the world are being destroyed to clear land for large industrial pulp, timber and biofuel (oil palm) plantations. Both clearings and monoculture plantations are severely affecting forest biodiversity, worsening global warming, and threatening the lives, livelihoods, and cultures of forest and Indigenous peoples and communities. The commercialization of GE trees will not only expand and entrench tree monocultures, it will add extremely dangerous and unpredictable environmental risks as well as new social, cultural and economic impacts.

We note that the last United Nations Conference on Biological Diversity COP8 meeting adopted decision VIII/19 (Forest biological diversity), which *“recommends Parties to take a precautionary approach when addressing the issue of genetically modified trees.”* This decision is founded on COP8’s recognition of *“the uncertainties related to the potential environmental and socio-economic impacts, including long-term and transboundary impacts, of genetically modified trees on global forest biological diversity, as well as on the livelihoods of indigenous and local communities, and given the absence of reliable data and of capacity in some countries to undertake risk assessments and to evaluate those potential impacts.”*

For the health and future of Canada’s forest ecosystems and those around the world:

- 1. We, the undersigned, ask for an end to existing field trials in Canada and an end to approvals for field trials of genetically engineered trees in Canada.**
- 2. We ask for an end to the use of public funds for field-testing and an end to field-testing at government research stations.**
- 3. We call upon the Canadian Government, at the COP9 meeting of the United Nations Convention on Biological Diversity May 19-30 2008, to support other governments in establishing a moratorium on the field testing, planting and commercial use of genetically engineered trees because of the serious risks they pose to biological diversity and to forest ecosystems in Canada and across the world.**

Signed:

1. ACEF de Québec
2. ACT for the Earth, Ontario
3. AmiEs de la Terre de l'Estrie
4. AmiEs de la Terre de Québec
5. L'Association Manger Santé Bio
6. Canadian Biotechnology Action Network
7. Communications, Energy & Paperworkers Union of Canada
8. Comité Uni-verts du Cégep de Gaspé
9. Conseil régional de l'environnement-Montréal
10. Council of Canadians
11. Dogwood Initiative
12. Earth Action, PEI
13. Earthroots, Ontario
14. Ecocert Canada
15. Ecological Farmers Association of Ontario
16. Ecology Action Centre, Nova Scotia
17. Environmental Coalition of PEI (ECO PEI)
18. Environment North
19. Équiterre
20. Falls Brook Centre, New Brunswick
21. Federation of Alberta Naturalists
22. Friends of the Earth Canada
23. Friends of the Oldman River
24. GeneAction, Toronto
25. Greenpeace Canada
26. Groupe de Recherche d'intérêt Public de l'UQAM
27. Groupe Solidarité Justice SNJM du Québec
28. Maison des femmes de Rimouski, Quebec
29. National Aboriginal Forestry Association
30. National Farmers Union of Canada
31. Nature Québec
32. Nature Saskatchewan
33. Oakvillegreen Conservation Association
34. Option consommateurs
35. Peaceful Parks Coalition
36. Le Poids vert de Rimouski-Neigette, Quebec
37. Polaris Institute
38. Réseau québécois des groupes écologistes
39. Sierra Club of Canada
40. Sierra Youth Coalition
41. SOS Gaia
42. Society for a GE Free BC
43. Under The Sleeping Buffalo, Alberta
44. Union of Ontario Indians
45. Union Paysanne, Quebec
46. USC Canada
47. West Kootenay EcoSociety, BC