

Food and Biotechnology

The Biosafety Endgame Comes to Montreal
January 2000

by *Anne Mitchell*

The past six months have seen an explosion of interest in the arrival of genetically engineered organisms into Canada's food supply. The public debates about the introduction of genetically modified foods, which have been raging in Europe for the past decade, have finally reached Canada's shores as Canadians realize that fundamental changes to the foods which they eat have been taking place without their knowledge or consent.

The international debate about these products, dubbed 'frankenfoods' by many, will reach a crescendo over the next two weeks in Montreal. Beginning this Thursday, delegates from more than 100 countries will gather there to attempt to complete the negotiation of an international agreement, called the Biosafety Protocol, on the rules for the transboundary movement of genetically modified organisms.

The development of the Protocol was mandated through the Convention on Biological Diversity, completed at the Rio Conference on Environment and Development in 1992. The drafters of the Convention were conscious of the looming commercialization of genetically engineered crops, fish, animals and microorganisms, and the potential threat that this could pose to the environment and human health.

The actual negotiations on the Protocol began in July 1996, and were to have been concluded at an Extra-Ordinary Conference of the Parties to the Convention in Cartagena, Colombia in February of last year.

However, the negotiations in Colombia collapsed in the face of intense opposition from a group of six countries (Canada, the United States, Australia, Uruguay, Chile and Argentina) called the Miami Group. The Miami Group has had two major objectives with respect to the Protocol: the exemption of transboundary movements of modified organisms that are commodities for use in food, feed or processing from the rules established through the Protocol; and the subordination of the Protocol to the World Trade Organization rules regarding international trade.

These six countries have invested heavily in agricultural biotechnology, and want to ensure that the Protocol does not permit countries to refuse imports of genetically engineered foods and other products on anything other than the extremely restrictive rules established by the WTO. An attempt to restart the negotiations in Vienna last September again failed in the face of

the Miami Group's intransigence.

Despite being the first developed country to sign the Convention on Biological Diversity, Canada's role to date in events surrounding the Protocol has been nothing short of an international embarrassment. Canada has been the Miami Group's chief public spokesperson since its formation. Moreover, in an obvious attempt to shut down the Biosafety negotiations altogether, Canada spearheaded efforts to begin parallel WTO discussions of the international rules for the movement of genetically modified organisms at the Seattle WTO Meeting. This effort was ultimately unsuccessful, reportedly due to interventions by the European Union Environment Ministers.

The outcome now hangs in the balance in Montreal over this week and next, and the stakes are very high. If the Miami Group succeeds in its efforts to subordinate the Protocol to the WTO rules, or prevent the completion of the Protocol altogether, it will be almost impossible for countries to say no to imports of genetically modified foods. It will also set a dangerous precedent for subordination of future international environmental agreements to the WTO. For these reasons, dozens of environment ministers from around the world are expected to attend the talks.

The irony of all of this, of course, is that it would be difficult to imagine a strategy better designed to reinforce public fears around the world regarding genetically engineered foods than that being pursued by the Miami Group. The group seems to believe that it will be able to use the WTO rules to force consumers to accept products they do not seem to trust or want.

The reality is that the global market has already turned against genetically modified foods. Major food retailers and processors around the world, including Canada's McCains Ltd., are moving as quickly as possible to assure consumers that they will exclude genetically modified organisms from their products, and to secure supplies of non-engineered inputs. The Canadian Wheat Board recognized these market realities when it announced this fall that it would not introduce genetically engineered wheat or barley into Canada's export crops until means could be found to segregate the engineered and non-engineered crops. The risk of losing all of the export markets for Canada's wheat, genetically engineered and otherwise, was simply too great.

Indeed, what little chance remains of securing markets for the Miami Group members' investments in agricultural biotechnology, rests with the conclusion of the strongest possible Protocol. This would reassure consumers by giving societies around the world a secure right to say no to imports of products which they have reason to believe may be harmful to their well-being.

So far, the members of the Miami Group, including Canada, have been unable to recognize these realities. Canada, in particular, seems set to throw away what little credibility it has left in international environmental negotiations in the pursuit of a market for products that no one seems to want.

Canada played a vital role in the conclusion of the original Convention on Biological Diversity in Rio in 1992. It is not too late for Canada to play a similar part in Montreal over the next two weeks. The question is whether Canada's leaders have the vision and wisdom to do so.

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