

Food and Biotechnology

Biosafety Protocol Backgrounder
January 2000

The proposed Protocol would set international rules regarding the transboundary movement of genetically modified organisms. Negotiations on the Protocol began in 1996, and were to have been concluded at an Extra-Ordinary Conference of the Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity in Cartagena, Colombia in February 1998.

However, the negotiations in Columbia collapsed in the face of intense opposition from a group of countries called the Miami Group (Canada, the U.S., Australia, Uruguay, Chile and Argentina), for whom Canada was the lead spokesperson. The Miami Group has had two major objectives with respect to the Protocol: 1) 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 2) 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. In fact, Canada has been seeking to shut down the Protocol negotiations, and move discussions of the rules regarding genetically engineered foods to the WTO.

An attempt to restart the negotiations in Vienna this September again failed in the face of resistance from the Miami Group.

The Parties to the Convention are now to reconvene in Montreal between January 20th and 28th to try completing the negotiations.

The stakes in these negotiations 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.