

1997 Canadian Civil Society's failed campaign on genetically engineered foods and crops

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There was a moral imperative for Canadian civil society to act precipitously to ban genetically engineered foods and crops to ensure food security; not only in Canada but also throughout the world. Canada, as one of the principal producers and exporters of genetically engineered foods and crops, has undermined global foods security.

Civil society had early warnings about the intention of the Canadian government to embark upon a strong program of genetically engineered foods and crops but these warnings were not heeded. The Federal government held consultation "stakeholder" meetings at least as early as 1993; with representatives from the genetically engineered food industry, University and the Consumers' Association (about 8 members) and the Canadian Environmental Network (CEN) (about 3 members including Brewster Kneen). At that time, none of the experimental crops had been released. In the minutes of the meeting, the CEN did not speak out strongly against the introduction of GE foods and crops but instead, indicated that there should be appropriate legislation in place and the Consumer's Association treated the issue as a "right to choose" issue. Subsequent to the consultation process, in 1993, there was an Annual General Meeting of the CEN in Prince Edward Island. This meeting was attended by one of the representatives who had participated in the consultation process.

**NO RED FLAG WAS RAISED ABOUT THE POTENTIAL RELEASE OF GENETICALLY ENGINEERED FOODS AND CROPS.** There was also another key "stakeholder" meeting in 1996, at which time, the government approved the release of soy, canola, corn and, I believe, squash. The same participants were included in the consultation meeting. In 1997, when I was leader of the Green Party of Canada, we ran in the election calling for the banning of genetically engineered foods and crops. At that time, I thought that Canada was still considering whether to release genetically engineered foods and crops in 1998. I attended an international conference in St Louis (Monsanto land) and drafted the Biodevastation Declaration - for the banning of GE food which was adopted at the Conference. It was only when I returned to Canada that I found out, through access to information, that the Canadian government had already approved GE products for release. In 1998, I drafted a formal petition calling for banning; this petition was placed on the floor of the House of Commons. When I asked Canadian environmentalists to sign the petition many of them indicated to me that they did not know that GE crops were growing in Canada. The CEN representatives had neglected to inform its members of the consultation process and the government decision to release GE.

The department of Agriculture began planting test sites for genetically engineered crops as early as 1988, and by this time, there were over 4500 trials across Canada (information provided through access to information).

In 1999,

I attended Biodevastation II, an international conference organized by Vandana Shiva in Delhi. I drafted a global resolution (which was signed by all but two participants)

calling for the banning of GE food and crops, opposing the patenting of living organisms, ending the exploitation of indigenous peoples, and promoting the transition to organic agriculture with a fair and just transition for affected farmers and communities.

I also worked on a petition at the WTO in Seattle, and then ran again in the 2000 election calling for the banning of GE food and crops. Throughout this period, I was constantly in conflict with civil society organizations that were calling for “labeling”. Unfortunately, apart from the campaign against Bovine Growth Hormone and GE wheat, the civil society campaign in Canada became the call for labeling of GE foods and crops. Labeling addresses the right to know issue, but not the equity (not everyone can afford to buy organic food), environmental, health and economic (many countries are wary about importing food from Canada) issues.

I believe that if the CEN had properly consulted with its members about the potential impact of the release of GE food in Canada there would have been a strong campaign right across Canada calling for the banning of GE foods and crops before they were introduced. Once GE crops are approved for release, and planted by farmers, there is a reluctance to call for the banning of genetically engineered food and crops. Internationally, Canada is perceived as Country of food insecurity because it is one of the principal producers and promoters of genetically engineered crops.

In 2000, at the UN, I circulated a petition calling for the banning of genetically engineered foods and crops. Delegates from the South endorsed the petition because they knew that, as there was considerable concern from civil society in the north about genetically engineered foods and crops, genetically engineered foods and crops would be increasingly dumped on the south. Canada has become an international pariah through its use of the WTO to coerce countries into accepting GE food and crops. Throughout the years, unintended health and environmental consequences of substances and activities have occurred and thus, have led to the adoption of a principle of international customary law—the precautionary principle (where there is a threat to human health or the environment, the lack of full scientific certainty shall not be used as a reason for postponing measures to prevent the threat). At the World Summit on Sustainable Development in JoBurg in 2002,

Canada along with the US and a few others was placed on the Axis of Environmental Evil by Greenpeace. At the conference, Canada obsequiously followed the US and argued that the precautionary principle was not a principle but a “measure” and that precautionary “measures” should be limited in their applicability. The State advocates of GE food and crops feared that if there had been wide-spread acceptance of the precautionary principle, the principle would then be used to justify the banning of both genetically engineered foods and crops, and the practice of condoning adventitious material –residue of living modified organisms in shipping container.

Currently, there is no Canadian political party and no civil society main stream group calling for the banning of genetically engineered foods and crops.