

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

ILLEGAL FIELD TRIAL OF GE CHERRY, KIWI AND OLIVE TREES EXPOSED IN ITALY BY THE GENETIC RIGHTS FOUNDATION

THE NOT-FOR-PROFIT GENETIC RIGHTS FOUNDATION (GRF) HAS TODAY EXPOSED THE EXISTENCE OF AN EXPERIMENTAL FIELD OF GE TREES, PLANTED BY THE FACULTY OF AGRICULTURE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF VITERBO, NEAR ROME, WHOSE PERMISSION EXPIRED IN 2008. IN 1998 THE UNIVERSITY WAS GRANTED A DECADE LONG PERMISSION TO CARRY OUT FIELD RESEARCH ON DIFFERENT PLANT SPECIES ENGINEERED AS TO MODIFY THE PHENOTYPE (I.E. SHORTER TREES) OR TO BETTER COMBAT FUNGI INFECTION. FURTHERMORE, ALMOST ALL OF THEM CONTAIN THE MARKER GENE NPTII CONFERRING RESISTANCE TO THE ANTIBIOTICS KANAMYCIN AND NEOMYCIN. AT THE BEGINNING OF 2009, THE PERMISSION HOLDER, PROF. EDDO RUGINI, SENT A REQUEST TO THE NATIONAL COMPETENT AUTHORITY FOR THE IMPLEMENTATION OF DIRECTIVE 2001/18, TO HAVE THE LICENCE EXTENDED UNTIL 2014. IN MARCH 2010, AFTER HAVING RECEIVED THE OPINION OF THE REGIONAL COMPETENT AUTHORITY, THE NCA DENIED THE EXTENSION OF THE PERMISSION AND ORDERED THE DISPOSAL OF THE TREES AND THE CLEAN UP OF THE SITE.

ACCORDING TO THE COMPETENT AUTHORITIES, THE AUTHORIZATION COULD HAVE BEEN GRANTED ONLY BY FULFILLING THE PRESCRIPTIONS LISTED IN THE REGIONAL REGULATION N°15, WHICH CAME INTO FORCE IN 2007. THESE INCLUDE THE CONFINEMENT OF GE PLANTS IN A ROOFED AND FLOORED INFRASTRUCTURE TO PREVENT THE POLLEN TO ESCAPE. BECAUSE THE NEW RULES INTERVENED EIGHT YEARS AFTER THE BEGINNING OF THE TRIAL, THE UNIVERSITY FACED A MAJOR PROBLEM IN COMPLYING WITH THE NEW CRITERIA AS IT WOULD HAVE BEEN TOO COSTLY TO MOVE THE ALREADY GROWN TREES INTO A CLOSED STRUCTURE. NONETHELESS, BY FAILING TO IMPLEMENT THE NCA INDICATIONS ISSUED IN 2010 THE UNIVERSITY WAS NEGLIGENT IN INCREASING THE RISK OF FURTHER VERTICAL CONTAMINATION. IN FACT, AS EXPOSED BY PICTURES COLLECTED BY GRF IN APRIL 2012, THE TREES ARE STILL ON SITE WITH CHERRY TREES FOUND TO BE IN FULL BLOSSOM WHEN THE FIELD WAS VISITED, WITH NO PROTECTION IN PLACE TO PREVENT POLLEN DISPERSION.

CONSIDERING THE ENTOMOPHILOUS NATURE OF THIS PLANT, THE PRESENCE OF BEES HIVES AT SOME HALF A KILOMETRE FROM THE FIELD INCREASES THE POSSIBILITY OF VERTICAL CONTAMINATION OF TRADITIONAL CHERRY TREES WHICH

ARE NOT UNCOMMON AROUND THE EXPERIMENTAL PLOT. IN ADDITION, OLIVE TREES ARE WIDELY CULTIVATED AT A SHORT DISTANCE FROM THE FIELD, IMPLYING A POSSIBLE ANAEMOPHILOUS CROSS-POLLINATION WITH GE TREES. MOREOVER, THE FRUIT OF BOTH TREE SPECIES MIGHT HAVE BEEN TRANSPORTED BY BIRDS OR SMALL MAMMALS.

THE DECISION OF THE UNIVERSITY NOT TO DESTROY THE GE TREES HAS LEAD TO FOUR MORE BLOSSOMING SEASONS FROM THE EXPIRATION DATE OF THE PERMISSION, AND TWO MORE FROM THE LAST COMMUNICATION FROM NCA FOR CHERRY TREES WITH OLIVE TREES EXPECTED TO BLOSSOM SOON. HAVING LASTED FOR SOME 14 YEARS, THE TRIAL IS ONE OF THE LONGEST IN EU, IF NOT THE LONGEST EVER, ON GE PLANT VARIETIES.

FOR THESE REASONS, GRF HAS SENT A FORMAL LETTER TO PROF. RUGINI, AS WELL AS TO THE NATIONAL AND REGIONAL AUTHORITIES ASKING THEM, ACCORDING TO THEIR OWN RESPONSIBILITY, TO ENSURE THE IMPLEMENTATION OF WHAT IS INDICATED BY THE NCA.

AT THE SAME TIME, GRF RECOGNIZES THE POSSIBILITY OF TAKING ADVANTAGE OF THE LONG TERM EXPERIMENT TO GARNER DATA WHICH WAS NOT SUPPOSED TO BE GATHERED IN THE ORIGINAL TRIAL DESIGN. WHILE PROF. RUGINI HAD IN FACT PLANNED TO COLLECT INFORMATION RELATED TO TRANSGENE PERFORMANCE AND ITS STABILITY WITHIN THE HOSTING GENOME, APPARENTLY NO DATA COLLECTION ON THE BIOCHEMICAL AND PROTEOMIC PROFILE OF THE GE PLANT, HORIZONTAL GENE TRANSFER IN SOIL, COMPOSITION OF MICRO FLORA AND FAUNA POPULATIONS IN THE RHIZOSPHERE, OR VERTICAL TRANSGENE TRANSFER WAS ENVISAGED. GRF, RECALLING THE AUSPICES OF THE ITALIAN MINISTER OF ENVIRONMENT TO PERFORM MORE RESEARCH ON GMOs IN ITALY, HAS ASKED THAT BEFORE DISPOSING OFF THE GE PLANTS, A SERIES OF PARAMETERS BE MEASURED (I.E. PHENOTYPIC CHARACTERIZATION) AND SAMPLES COLLECTED TO PERFORM AS MUCH RESEARCH AS POSSIBLE WITH THE AIM OF FILLING THE KNOWLEDGE GAP CONCERNING THE OVERALL RELATIONSHIP OF TRANSGENIC TREES WITH RHIZOSPEHERE AND THE SURROUNDING ENVIRONMENT.

WHILE THE COLLECTION OF THIS DATA WON'T LEAD TO ANY SIGNIFICANT DELAY IN THE PROCESS OF CLEANING UP THE TRIAL SITE, IT WILL OFFER A GREAT OPPORTUNITY TO CONTRIBUTE TO BETTER UNDERSTANDING OF WHETHER AND TO WHAT EXTENT THE CONCEPT OF SUBSTANTIAL EQUIVALENCE IS APPLICABLE AND HOW THE DELIBERATE RELEASE OF GE PLANTS MIGHT INTERFERE WITH ENDEMIC SPECIES AND THE SURROUNDING ENVIRONMENT.

THE RESEARCH PROJECT SHOULD INCLUDE RANDOM SAMPLING TO COLLECT CHERRIES AND OLIVES WITHIN A 5 KM RADIUS FROM THE TRIAL PLOT TO CHECK WHETHER THE GE PLANTS HAVE CROSS POLLINATED WITH TRADITIONAL VARIETIES

PRESENT IN THE AREA. GRF HAS PROPOSED THAT THIS RESEARCH BE CONDUCTED BY PUBLIC LABORATORIES AND THAT ALL PHASES AND RESULTS BE TRANSPARENT AND FREELY ACCESSIBLE TO THE PUBLIC.

FINALLY, GRF HAS URGED THE MINISTRY OF ENVIRONMENT TO IMPROVE THE INFORMATION CONTAINED IN THE ITALIAN BIOSAFETY CLEARING HOUSE WHERE ALL THE INFORMATION CONCERNING THE ENVIRONMENTAL RELEASE OF GMOs ARE SUPPOSED TO BE AVAILABLE TO ALL INTERESTED PARTIES.

UNFORTUNATELY, THE ITALIAN BCH DIDN'T CONTAIN ANY REFERENCE TO THOSE PERMISSIONS GRANTED BEFORE 2003, EVEN IF THE EXPERIMENT, AUTHORIZED PRIOR TO THAT DATE, MIGHT WELL EXTEND AFTER THAT DATE, AS IN THE CASE WITH THE LONG LASTING EXPERIMENT AT THE UNIVERSITY OF VITERBO. REFERENCES TO GE OLIVE TREES CAN BE FOUND ONLY IN THE REGISTER AT THE JOINT RESEARCH CENTRE OF ISPRA WHILE BOTH DATABASES LACK ANY REFERENCE TO THE CHERRY TREES. OTHER DISCREPANCIES BETWEEN THE TWO DATABASES ALSO REGARD OTHER EXPERIMENTATION AND ARE A CLEAR INDICATION OF THE NEED FOR URGENT INTERVENTION FROM THE COMPETENT AUTHORITIES TO GUARANTEE THE PUBLIC RIGHT TO KNOW.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION:

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