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biodiversity | food sovereignty | agro-ecology | social justice

Rural KZN farmers contest proposed seed Bills in Parliament

Biowatch, along with farmer representatives from two rural northern KwaZulu-Natal project sites, travelled to Cape Town in May to give oral submissions in Parliament at the public hearings on the recently tabled Plant Breeders' Rights and Plant Improvement Bills.

Biowatch believes it is the duty of South Africa's Parliament to approve seed policies that will benefit the majority of its population, denying laws that give private ownership to what used to be commonly held for centuries. Private commercial rights can never override the rights of farmers and humankind to save seed and to grow food which feeds communities. In the absence of any policy or legislation that recognises and provides legal space for the vital contribution of the informal seed sector, public breeding and conservation activities, seed regulations and trade laws have become tools aimed at preventing farmers from producing seeds independently.

Seed regulations are increasingly restrictive and are now used in tandem with plant breeders' rights to protect the interests of seed companies and private breeders at the expense of agro-biodiversity and the independence of farmers. It is therefore critically important to consider and determine the impact that seed regulatory systems developed for industrialised, commercial agriculture have had and will have on the informal seed sector, small-holder farmers, conservation and public breeding priorities.

Our written submissions on both Bills are available on our website: www.biowatch.org.za.

Richard Mthembu from Ingwavuma and Thombithini Ndwandwe from Mtubatuba in Parliament awaiting the start of the public hearings on the Plant Breeders' Rights and Plant Improvement Bills.

Lawrence Mkhaliphi (centre), Biowatch's agro-ecology manager, participated in the South and Eastern Africa Agro-ecology Knowledge and Skills Sharing Workshop, which took place in April in Lusaka, Zambia. Here he is with workshop facilitators Miguel Altieri and Clara Nicholls, professors from the University of California, Berkeley, and well known advocates for agro-ecology.

On Saturday 23 May, Biowatch and rural farmers in northern KZN joined the global March Against

Monsanto, saying loudly and clearly: No to GMOs!

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Farmers, extension officers, teachers and representatives from civil society organisations attended

the Biowatch agro-ecology workshop in Pongola in May.

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The Seed and Knowledge Initiative (SKI) hosted a meeting in Zimbabwe to explore the establishment of a

community of practice on seed and knowledge systems.

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From the director

Participating in hearings at the national Parliamentary Portfolio Committee on Agriculture, running an agro-ecology training workshop, linking up with partners in Zimbabwe to enhance capacity on seed and knowledge systems in Southern Africa and marching against Monsanto are some of Biowatch's recent important activities highlighted in this newsletter.

We have also been engaging at a national level on conservation agriculture. The Agricultural Research Council is facilitating a policy development process initiated by the national Department of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries (DAFF) and the Food and Agricultural Organisation of the United Nations (FAO). Biowatch brings a critique of conservation agriculture to the discussions to help dispel the myth that it is a sustainable way forward. Hiding behind the positive-sounding name is an agriculture that relies on massive amounts of toxic herbicides and monoculture agriculture – both having devastating impacts.

Our on-going work with small-holder farmers and agro-ecology continues to inspire us as the sustainable way forward for food security, rural livelihoods and low carbon footprint agriculture. We join the farmers in saying "*Phansi ngoManyolo Phansi*" and "*Phansi ngomaGMOs*"! (See MAM article on page 3.)

We are looking forward to the alternative civil society programme that will be held in parallel with the World Forestry Congress (WFC) in Durban in September. WFC 2015 is hosted by South Africa and is held under the auspices of the FAO. "Forest" as a term defined by the FAO, like conservation agriculture, hides a host of dangers and includes the massive industrial tree plantations (ITPs) that devastate communities, biodiversity, land and water resources. Biowatch will be joining other civil society organisations in the civil society programme – if you will be in Durban in September, sign up (www.timberwatch.org.za) and remember "Plantations are not Forests"!

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GM update

GM wheat field trial fails to repel aphids

In their recent press release "Scientists disappointed at results from GM wheat field trial" (25 June 2015), Rothamsted Research, a United Kingdom agricultural research institution, detail how their £732,000 research trial of GM wheat failed to repel aphids. The research costs did not include £444,000 for fencing (against intruders and wild animals) and £1,794,439 for security measures. According to Rothamsted Research, scientists "conducted experiments to discover whether wheat could be genetically modified (GM) to produce an aphid alarm pheromone and whether it would repel aphids in the lab and field." The data showed that the GM wheat did not repel aphid pests in the field.

In response to the failure, Dr Helen Wallace, Director of GeneWatch UK had this to say: "With GM crops it's always jam tomorrow and never jam today. We have had more than 30 years of promises of useful traits but they have not been delivered, despite massive promotion of GM technology by governments and PR companies. There is a big opportunity cost because billions in R&D funding could have been spent in better ways. GM has consistently been shown to be a distraction away from developing real solutions to real problems."

GM potato

An alert to readers is that the Executive Council of the GMO Act (in South Africa) has been reminded that the "potato appeal is still outstanding". This is detailed in the minutes of the November 2014 Executive Council meeting, the most recent minutes on the Department of Agriculture's website. Although the context is not given in the minutes, it appears to refer to the appeal by the Agricultural Research Council of the non-approval of the commercial release of their genetically modified potato – a potato with a built-in pesticide against the tuber moth. It is hoped that this reminder does not imply that there is renewed effort to push another GM crop onto the largely unsuspecting South African public!

Note to readers: In South Africa, there are only three crops that have been approved for commercial release – GM maize, GM soya and GM cotton. GM wheat has not been approved anywhere in the world for commercial release although there have been many field trials. This means that the wheat flour one buys in the shops is not genetically modified. This is not the case for the mielie (maize) meal that one buys in South African shops, which is almost entirely genetically modified.

Agro-ecology farmers organised anti-Monsanto and GMO marches in Ingwavuma (top left), Mtubatuba (top right) and Pongola (bottom row), and joined the international March Against Monsanto (MAM) in May.

Farmers march against Monsanto

On Saturday 23 May, Biowatch and rural farmers in northern KZN joined the global March Against Monsanto, saying loudly and clearly: No to GMOs; No to industrial agriculture; No to the corporate control of our seeds and our food!

Farmers in Mtubatuba, Pongola and Ingwavuma marched to their local municipal and Department of Agriculture offices, demanding recognition of their right to practice agro-ecology and to grow, save and share traditional seeds, safe from the risk of contamination from unwanted genes and poisons.

The March Against Monsanto (MAM) is a global protest against Monsanto and GMOs. Since the first march in 2013, MAM has grown into an international grassroots movement and at least 428 cities in 38 countries around the world took part in MAM 2015.

Although this global protest targets Monsanto because it represents some of the worst products and practices, it is also aimed at other agribusiness multinationals responsible for the globally damaging industrial agriculture system. The other major corporations profiting from toxic agricultural chemicals and GMOs are Bayer, Syngenta, BASF, Dow Agroscience and Dupont Pioneer.

Agro-ecology farmers called a press conference in April during the Biowatch advocacy workshop in Hluhluwe where they outlined their plans to join the worldwide MAM. Their message was clear: We reject GMOs and pesticides, which are products of the industrial agriculture system that is poisoning our soil and our water. This system makes farmers dependent on expensive corporate products and puts our entire food system at risk of collapse in the face of disease outbreaks and climate change.

Farmers, extension officers, teachers and representatives from civil society organisations around the country attended a Biowatch agro-ecology workshop in Pongola, from 5-7 May. Practical, step-by-step information was shared with participants, who were able to visit a local small-holder farm and witness agro-ecology in practice. Pictured left: Lawrence Mkhaliphi, Biowatch Agro-ecology Manager, demonstrates how to test soils.

Exploring the establishment of a learning network on seed and knowledge were: Back row – Julious Piti (CELUCT/PORET), Jaci van Niekerk (UCT/SKI), Patrick Kasasa (CTDO), Gertrude Pswarayi (PELUM), Ulli Westerman (TSURO), Norah Samupunga (ZIMSOFF), Carol Thompson, Nelson Mudzingwa (ZIMSOFF). Front row – Andrew Mushita (CTDO), John Wilson (facilitator), Regassa Feyissa (EOSA), Elfrieda Pschorn-Strauss (SKI) and Lawrence Mkhaliphi (Biowatch).

Enhancing capacity on seed and knowledge systems in Southern Africa

In March, the Seed and Knowledge Initiative (SKI) hosted a meeting in Zimbabwe to explore the establishment of a regional community of practice on seed and knowledge systems.

"To enable interactive and horizontal learning to take place, we need to create learning partnerships where we can learn from 'experts' (which include farmers, researchers, and each other). The small group that gathered at this meeting is envisaged as the seed from which such a process of learning and deeper understanding can be pioneered and grow," said Elfrieda Pschorn-Strauss, SKI co-ordinator.

SKI's objective to initiate such collaborative knowledge building and research, across different sectors and different disciplines, supports it's other three objectives which are to: enable farmers and communities to revive and enhance traditional seed and agricultural knowledge systems; support community and farmer organisations in building their regional and international networks for deepening and affirming their knowledge systems; engage nationally and regionally with key stakeholders and decision makers to advocate for policies and legislation that actively support the revival of traditional seed diversity and related knowledge systems and agro-ecology.

SKI is a collaboration between Biowatch, the Mupo Foundation and the NRF Bio-economy Research Chair at the University of Cape Town. Based on the success of an initial 18-month pilot project, the four year (2015-2018) Seed and Knowledge Initiative was officially launched in Cape Town in January.

WHAT'S COMING UP?

- Seed rituals: Ingwavuma 18 August; Tshaneni 19 August; Pongola 21 August; and Zimele 28 August
- Global civil society event on corporations and plantations (a counter to the World Forestry Congress), Durban: 7-11 September
- World Food Day: 16 October

Biowatch Bulletin will keep you updated.
If you would like to join our e-mailing list, please e-mail your details to **info@biowatch.org.za**

Farmers from Biowatch project sites in northern KZN gathered in March in Hluhluwe to deepen their understanding of agro-ecology (AE) and formalise their commitment to the auditing and certification of their produce through the adoption of a Participatory Guarantee System (PGS). Making a first party attestation – "I am AE compliant" – are: (Top row) Khalesakhe Mkhwanazi, Mtubatuba; Thombithini Ndwandwe, Mtubatuba; Reginah Mthembu, KwaNgwanase; and Sbongle Myeni, Ingwavuma. (Bottom row) Moses Myeni, Tshaneni; Lucy Tembe, Ingwavuma; and Eunice Ngidi, Mtubatuba.