



OPEN LETTER TO THE ORGANIZERS & ATTENDEES OF
“CONSERVATION REMIX”:

PAMELA RONALD’S “GENETICALLY MODIFIED CONSERVATION”
is “a cover to introduce harmful technology”
(Friends of the Earth, Africa)

We are terribly concerned about the provision of a major platform to Prof. Pamela Ronald of UC Davis to claim that genetic engineering is somehow related to environmental conservation.

Why is the “Conservation Remix” event promoting such spin?

Ronald is a major “happy face” for the genetic engineering industry. She maintains the fiction that organic agriculture can—and should—include GE practices, despite:

- The fact that under Organic Foods Production Act of 1990, after a tremendous outpouring of democratic concern (the largest number of comments ever received), **the USDA definition of organic specifically excludes GE**. She seems unconcerned that any understanding of “sustainability” does not encompass GE. This is because genetic engineering is rarified knowledge restricted to technocrats, undemocratically controlled by very few people, and often the subject of patent monopolies and coercive “technology agreements” which forbid the ancient farm practices of seed saving and sharing, etc. This is incompatible with the evolving notion of “food sovereignty”.
- The development of 2 UN treaties to deal with problems GE crops can cause to biodiversity and human health (including recognizing that damages have occurred and providing mechanisms to assure liability). Although the US is not a member (no surprise!), 163 nations are parties and are engaging in actions to prevent the negative effects genetic engineering can have on environmental conservation.

Ronald’s paeans to genetic engineering often rely on faulty or distorted references. **The Conservation Remix slogan “You’ll Never See Green the Same Way Again” takes on a very ironic aspect since, in truth, GMOs are not compatible with sustainable agriculture. Indeed, they are harmful to the environment and human health:**

- **Despite propaganda to the contrary, GMOs do not increase yields.¹**
- **Even though governments and industry do not fund public peer-reviewed research on environmental and health effects of GE, independent scientists have shown that many problems are indicated.²** One significant example is research published a year ago by Quebec scientists finding GE material in the blood of women and fetuses, thus showing that it is not degraded by digestion and can persist within the body. In a society not skewed by the interests of powerful corporations, these sorts of research would be clear red flags prompting more investigation, but none has been announced to follow up these troubling concerns.
- **Although Ronald and other proponents of GE claim that GM crops would reduce agricultural chemical and pesticide use, this is empirically not true.³** USDA data, itself, shows that *pesticide use increased* an additional 318.4 million pounds over the first 13 years of GM crops, 1996-2008, primarily due to increased applications of the proprietary pesticides used on GM crops.

Agro-ecological approaches, and not the direction being pushed by Pam Ronald, have been recommended by the World Bank and UN sponsored IAASTD Report⁴ and UN’s Special Rapporteur on Hunger⁵. Ronald’s approach requires large amounts of chemical inputs. A recent article in *Scientific American* notes that pushing for maximum agricultural productivity (depending on synthetic fertilizers) can be damaging to the environment; agro-ecological agriculture relies on processes that promote biodiversity, healthier soils, and reduced groundwater pollution, among other benefits, all of which contribute to a healthier and more sustainable agricultural system overall.

The contradictions between conserving biodiversity and the proponents of GMOs are perhaps most closely being played out in Africa. A local Seattle group, AGRA Watch, is engaged with US and African partners to monitor the African agricultural development programs which the US government, corporations like Monsanto, and “philanthrocapitalist” organizations like the Gates Foundation are promoting; these are largely based on corporate-controlled high-tech approaches, and involve the use of GMOs. Such activities are seen by most African rural and farmers’ organizations as yet another example of sophisticated neo-colonialist foreign intervention, forcing African smallholder farmers into adopting someone else’s model of desirable practices. There is little or no African grassroots involvement (much less control) in shaping these programs, and the Gates Foundation uses its influence to pressure African governments and educational institutions (who are already under pressure from the U.S. government) to adopt this model - high-tech, high-input agriculture, the includes the use of GMOs. Ronald’s work is designed to make such unpalatable medicine go down more easily.

Major African NGOs concerned about biodiversity issued a statement to governments of Eastern African nations this past May, noting in part,

“Our concerns about GMOs stem from the historical lessons of the Green Revolution in Asia and other parts of the world where the agricultural diversity that was a result of thousands of years of peasant knowledge and practice was destroyed and replaced with sterile hybrids grown with dangerous chemicals that had dire impacts on both human and environmental health. GMO’s are a product of the same mindset that gave us the Green Revolution agricultural system which does not recognize the rich knowledge of our farmers and build on their ability to continue feeding our nation.”

This “Conservation Remix” event is supported indirectly by the Gates Foundation through the “Seattle Science Festival”. Ronald has a very cozy relationship with the Gates Foundation, although it is not clear whether she receives any funding for her activities. The book Ronald did with her husband has been called a “fantastic piece of work” by Bill Gates and praised by technology-loving whiz-bang publications and folks supported by the biotech industry. Ronald returns the compliments to Gates on her website⁶. A local reviewer of the manuscript, however, did not feel it was worth being published.

We are disappointed that the organizers of this event didn't include a speaker who could show that GE should not be considered by conservationists as part of a sustainable future.



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¹ See Failure to Yield: Evaluating the Performance of Genetically Engineered Crops, by Doug Gurian-Sherman, Union of Concerned Scientists, April 2009 and “Why GMOs Won’t Feed the World Despite What You Read in the New York Times” by Anna Lappé, *Civil Eats*, August 19th, 2011, written in response to “Engineering Food for All”, by Nina Fedoroff, *NY Times*, August 18th, 2011.

² See “Environmental and Health Impacts of GM crops - the Science” (Greenpeace, September 30, 2011). Health effects have been summarized in a lay article “What we know—and don’t know—about the safety of eating GMOs” (Tom Philpott, *Grist*, May 16, 2011).

³ See “Critical Issue Report: The First Thirteen Years Impacts of Genetically Engineered Crops on Pesticide Use in the United States” (Charles Benbrook, The Organic Center – 2009). Benbrook is an agricultural economist who has worked for Congress and the USDA.

⁴ See <http://www.agassessment.org/index.cfm?page=iaastd%20reports&itemid=2713>

⁵ http://www.srfood.org/images/stories/pdf/officialreports/20110308_a-hrc-16-49_agroecology_en.pdf.

⁶ See <http://indica.ucdavis.edu/news/bill-gates-next-target-revolutionize-farming> and an interview: <http://blogs.newzealand.usembassy.gov/ambassador/2011/04/dr-pamela-ronald-talks-about-plants-and-genes/>