

America's Masterplan is to Force GM Food on the World

The reason the US took Europe to the WTO court was to prise open lucrative markets elsewhere

by John Vidal

Just a few years ago, World Trade Organisation officials used to act hurt when described by social activists as irresponsible, secretive bureaucrats who trampled over national sovereignty and placed free trade over the environment or human rights. But that was when the global-trade policeman ruled on disputes that had little bearing on Europeans.

The WTO court's latest ruling will greatly increase the number of people who believe the organisation needs radical reform, if not burial. This week three judges emerged after years of secret deliberation to rule that Europe had imposed a de facto ban on Genetically Modified (GM) food imports between 1999 and 2003, violating WTO rules. The court also ruled that Austria, France, Germany, Greece, Italy and Luxembourg had no legal grounds to impose their own unilateral import bans. "Europe guilty!" shouted the US press. "This is glorious news for the Bush administration," said one blogger. Article continues

Actually, the judges said much more, but in true WTO style no one has been allowed to know what. A few bureaucrats in the US, EU, Argentina and Canada have reportedly seen the full 1,045-page report, and an edited summary of some of its conclusions has been leaked. But no one, it seems, will take responsibility for the ruling, which may force the EU to pay hundreds of millions of dollars to compensate some of the world's most heavily subsidised farmers, and could change the laws of at least six countries that have imposed GM bans.

In fact the US has mostly won a lot of new enemies. Rather than going

away, as the biotech companies and Washington fervently hoped, the opposition to GM foods seems to have been growing since 2004 when the case was brought to the WTO. Europe, its member states and its consumers all rejected the ruling last week, making the WTO look even more out of touch and incompetent to rule on issues about the environment, health and consumer choice.

The European commission, which has been trying to force GM crops into Europe over the heads of its member states, says the ruling is "irrelevant" because its laws have already been changed. Meanwhile, individual countries who dislike being told what to eat or grow by the EC as much as the WTO say they will resist any attempts to make them accept GM.

In the past few days Hungary has declared that it is in its economic interests to remain GM-free, and Greece and Austria have affirmed their total opposition to the crops. Italy has called the WTO ruling "unbalanced" and Poland's prime minister has pledged to keep the country GM-free. Local government is even more opposed: more than 3,500 elected councils in 170 regions of Europe have declared themselves GM-free.

There is little the WTO, the EC or the US can do in face of this coalition of the unwilling. If the US again tries to impose its GM products on Europe – as it did in the 90s, sparking the whole debacle – the attempt will backfire. Europe's biotech industry may now try to force the EC to use the WTO judgment to get the six countries with import bans to repeal anti-GM laws, but it will meet an even broader, more determined movement.

In fact, Washington and the US companies are not that bothered by Europe's predictable reaction. Europe has all but dropped off the world's GM map. The companies and the supermarkets know there is little or no demand for GM crops, and that Europe's subsidised farmers are reluctant to alienate the public further by growing them.

It is now clear that the real reason the US took Europe to the WTO court was to make it easier for its companies to prise open regulatory doors in China, India, south-east Asia, Latin America and Africa, where most US exports now go. This is where millions of tonnes of US food aid heads, and where US GM companies are desperate to have access, buying up seed companies and schmoozing presidents and prime ministers.

More than two-thirds of exported US corn now goes to Asia and Africa, where once it went to Europe. As the Monsanto man said this week about the WTO ruling: "Our feeling is that it's important for countries other than the EU to have science-based regulatory frameworks."

Like the tobacco industry, GM companies are now focusing almost exclusively on developing countries. But here the industry is meeting stiff opposition from powerful unions and farming groups. Brazil has caved in, but Bolivia may shortly become the first Latin American country to fully reject GM. Some Indian states are deeply opposed, and there have been major demonstrations in the Philippines, Korea, Indonesia and elsewhere. India's largest farmers' organisation this week said the result of the WTO verdict would be that the US would become more aggressive in dumping GM food on to developing countries.

The US maintains that through the WTO it has won a great victory for free trade, and passed a significant milestone in US attempts "to have GM crops accepted throughout the world". Perhaps, but the battle is far from won, and in the meantime anyone opposing the crops is being reclassified as an enemy of America.

Within hours of the WTO decision, José Bové, the French farmer who has led European protests, arrived in New York to give an invited talk to Cornell students about GM food – and was immediately sent back to France by the US government.

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