

Report Calls on the UN Biodiversity Convention to Stop Dangerous US Fungus Experiments



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(Hamburg & Seattle, 2 May 00) In a detailed report released today, the Sunshine Project, a new international non-profit dedicated to exposing abuses of biotechnology, calls on the upcoming Nairobi meeting of the UN Biodiversity Convention to halt the USA's dangerous experiments with fungi designed to kill narcotic crops.

TARGETED AT DEVELOPING COUNTRIES OF ASIA AND THE AMERICAS

Intended to kill opium poppy, coca, and cannabis plants, the microbes present risks to human health and biodiversity. There is imminent danger that a highly infectious fungus will be deliberately released in Andean and Amazonian centres of diversity. The US-backed fungi have already been used experimentally on opium poppy and cannabis in the US and in Central Asia.

Fungus targets include hundreds of thousands of cultivated hectares in narcotic crop-producing countries in South, Southeast, and Central Asia, along with Mexico, Central, and South American countries. Thirty years after the heavy use of toxic herbicides (Agent Orange) in the Vietnam War, the USA is planning the use of a biological agent ("Agent Green") in the Drug War.

ENVIRONMENTALLY UNSOUND - THREAT TO ENDANGERED SPECIES

The strains of the fungi *Fusarium oxysporum* and *Pleospora papveracae* might infect and kill plants other than coca, poppy, and cannabis in ecologically sensitive areas of Asia and the Americas.

US Department of Agriculture researchers have never tested the host range of Agent Green on plant species native to target countries, including Colombia, which is currently number one on the USA's list of places to use the fungi. Only a limited range of commercial crops were tested, which is little indication of how the fungi will behave in the varied and poorly-understood real-world ecologies where they might be used.

"The USA is playing roulette with irreplaceable biological diversity" says Susana Pimiento Chamorro, a Colombian lawyer with the Sunshine Project. *"In Colombia, four close relatives of coca are already listed as endangered. Agent Green might be the last step to their extinction."*

It is well known that some strains of *F. oxysporum* can infect many different plants, even distantly related species. To avoid disturbing delicate ecosystems in the Amazon, rural Southeast Asia, and the Andes, the fungi must not be released.

One of the most highly prized butterflies in the world, the Agrias (*Agrias sp.*) depends on coca's wild relatives in Amazonian rainforest. Plants in the coca genus are the butterfly's host plant, the only place where young larvae feed and mature. A beautiful fast flyer listed as endangered in Brazil, one of Agrias' centres of speciation is the Upper Putumayo River region, precisely where the US intends to apply the heaviest doses of the coca-killing fungus. If the fungus attacks wild coca relatives, it will ultimately hurt the Agrias butterfly.

Even more disturbing is the fact that strains of *Fusarium oxysporum* are highly toxic to animals and humans. Birds feeding on plant seeds are endangered, and consumption of the coca leaves – which is legal in Peru and Bolivia – might pose a health threat. *"Fusaria can produce mycotoxins that are deadly enough to be considered weapons of war and are listed as biological agents in the draft Protocol to the Biological and Toxic Weapons Convention,"* says Sunshine Project biologist Dr. Jan Van Aken, *"US researchers have not tested Agent Green's production of these deadly mycotoxins."*

Once released into the environment, the deadly fungus cannot be recalled. Indeed, the coca fungus appears to have escaped scientists' grasp when it jumped into control plots during field tests in Hawaii.

REJECTED IN THE USA ... BUT PROMOTED ABROAD

The fungus has been clearly rejected in the USA, the world's number one producer of illicit cannabis. Last year, the Florida Environmental Protection Agency emphatically opposed and halted a proposal to use Fusaria. According to the Agency's director: *"It is difficult, if not impossible to control the spread of Fusarium species. The mutated fungi can cause disease in large number of crops... Fusarium species are more active in warm soils and can stay resident in the soil for years."*

Senior US officials have failed to obtain the financial backing of other governments for the plan. Except for modest support from the UK for the poppy killer, no other donor country has financially backed the idea. But this has not stopped the USA's drug warriors from pressuring Asian and South American countries. Through the offices of the UN Drug Control Programme (UNDCP), pressure is being put on Colombia especially, which is being asked to sign a field testing contract. Ironically, it was under Colombian leadership that the recent

Biosafety Protocol negotiations were successfully concluded, and Colombia's Environment Minister is now President of the high-level UN Commission on Sustainable Development.

FUNGUS MOVEMENT CAN LEAD TO INNOCENT VICTIMS

According to the Sunshine Project's Edward Hammond, "*An obvious and flagrant flaw in the fungal eradication plan is that microbes pay no attention to passport and visa requirements. The fungus can spread without regard to political borders, potentially attacking legal crops and countries that do not agree to its use.*"

There are many potential victims. Canadian industrial hemp growers have expressed concern about US plans. Fungus applications in coca growing areas in southern Colombia, for example, might lead to infections in Ecuador, Brazil, or Peru (a legal coca producer). Use in Central and South Asia, for example Afghanistan, Pakistan, or Turkmenistan, could lead to losses for bordering India which, under a strict licensing system, produces about half the world's legal pharmaceutical opiates. In Southeast Asia, a variety of disastrous scenarios can be envisioned, where opium poppy areas for example in Burma border on Laos, Thailand and China, which produces opiates for domestic pharmaceutical use.

If developing country production of legal pharmaceutical opiates is damaged by fungus spread, industrialized producers like Australia – which has already planted extra-potent genetically engineered opium poppy - could increase market share.

THREATENS TRADITIONAL USE

The rights of indigenous people who cultivate the target crops for traditional, non-drug uses are also endangered. In South Asia, poppies are used in traditional medicine and plant material is used as fodder. Coca has been used for over a millennium in traditional medicine from Colombia to Argentina. Under the Biodiversity Convention indigenous peoples are afforded rights to their biodiversity - including medicinal plants. Indigenous people who live close to where fungus is applied may become innocent Drug War victims.

GENETIC ENGINEERING POSSIBLE

The United States says that the fungus varieties it wants to use in developing countries are not genetically-engineered. But it has created genetically-modified strains in the laboratory. US scientists have also cloned virulent genes from related fungi (*Fusarium* strains that attack potatoes) with the possible intent of increasing the kill rate of anti-drug fungi through biotechnology. A consequence of permitting testing and use of the current fungi will be future pressure for countries to allow "enhanced" Living modified organisms (LMOs) fungi.

ACTION BY THE BIODIVERSITY CONVENTION IS URGENTLY NEEDED

Governments have a legitimate need to control narcotic crops; but doing so through the use of "Agent Green" microbes is profoundly misguided and sets an alarming precedent. If governments are idle while microbial agents are developed to attack narcotic crops, how will they protect biodiversity if microbes are developed to kill other unpopular and regulated crops, like tobacco, kava, betel nut palm, *peyote*, *ayahuasca*, or hops?

The Sunshine Project, which sent its report to 500 government delegates from 100 countries, is suggesting several options for government action during the May 15-26 Conference of the Parties to the UN Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) in Nairobi. Delegates should adopt a resolution calling for a halt of the US program and condemning the use of any microbe for the purpose of eradicating cultivated crops. Such a resolution is not a statement on drug policy; but instead a reiteration of fundamental objectives of the Convention. The CBD cannot remain quiet while agents are developed by a non-party to deliberately obliterate biodiversity, especially plants with legitimate medicinal and traditional uses.

The CBD may also consider studying the fungus under its Agriculture Program, because of the fungus's impacts on pollinators and soil diversity – both specific responsibilities of the Convention. Governments may also request the CBD Executive Secretary to urgently convey the CBD's views to the United National Drug Control Programme (UNDCP), which has been – sometimes reluctantly – helping implementation of the US program.

About the Sunshine Project

The Sunshine Project is an international non-profit organization dedicated to bringing information to light on harmful abuses of biotechnology. The Project has expert staff with training in law, policy, and biology with lengthy experience on policy issues. The Project has offices in Hamburg, Germany and Seattle, USA. For more information, visit our website (<http://www.sunshine-project.org>) or contact us by telephone or e-mail.

A copy of the Sunshine Project's report on Agent Green is available at our website or on request.

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