



IN THIS ISSUE

- 1. Biowatch vs. Monsanto at the Constitutional Court**
- 2. Staff news: New director and other staff news at Biowatch**
- 3. Workshop: “People’s alternatives to industrial agriculture and GMOs”**
- 4. Update on Limpopo and KwaZulu-Natal activities**
- 5. Biowatch holds workshop in the Eastern Cape**
- 6. Biowatch represented at the World Social Forum**
- 7. Voices from Africa: farmers and environmentalists speak out against AGRA “A New Green Revolution in Africa”**
- 8. Sign on to the GE maize crop failure petition**

1. Biowatch vs. Monsanto at the Constitutional Court

In a continuing David and Goliath scenario, the Biowatch case against the seed and chemical giant Monsanto moved to the Constitutional Court in February.

The Legal Resources Centre has supported Biowatch in this case, taking it from the appeal to the High Court, to the Supreme Court and now to the highest court in the land.

More details of the case are in the briefing “Biowatch at the Constitutional Court” (www.biowatch.org.za). Judgment is expected later this year.



Lawrence Mkhaphi, Nombulelo Siqwana-Ndulo, Rachel Wynberg, David Fig and Rose Williams at the Constitutional Court

2. Staff news: New director and other staff news at Biowatch

After Leslie Liddell left Biowatch in January, Rose Williams was appointed acting Director. Rose has since met with several Biowatch funders, including the Heinrich Böll Stiftung, the Ford Foundation, the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust, UNDP (GEF) and the DG Murray Trust. It is gratifying to see the continued support given to Biowatch during the 9-year legal battle. Generous support has also been given by many other individuals and civil society organisations.

Nicci van Noordwyk, Biowatch’s Office Manager for many years, resigned in March and is now working at SAFeAGE (South African Freeze Alliance against Genetic Engineering) as well as at the Primary

Science Programme. We are pleased that Nicci’s expertise and experience has not been lost to the anti-GE movement and thank her for her many years of dedicated service - and wish her well in her future endeavours.

For the past four months, Anna Nilsson, a post-graduate student from the Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences (and who recently completed her bachelor’s thesis on the Massive Food Production Programme in the Eastern Cape) has been working as a volunteer at Biowatch. She has been of immeasurable help – assisting with research, providing administrative support as well as being the resident photographer!

3. Workshop: “People’s alternatives to industrial agriculture and GMOs”

From 24 - 26 February, 53 participants from NGOs and small farmers’ organisations, as well as activists engaged in agricultural policy and rural development, gathered at a national meeting hosted by Biowatch and the Surplus People Project (SPP). This took place at the Goedgedacht Conference Centre near Malmesbury in the Western Cape.

With SPP, in partnership with AS-PTA in Brasil and the Chetna Organic Farmers Association in India, Biowatch is collaborating on this Ford Foundation funded project. The main purpose of this civil society programme involving India, Brasil and South Africa (IBSA) is to facilitate information sharing on advocacy campaigns in order to ensure a serious approach to biosafety at an international level. This also includes seed management & conservation, and agro-ecology in local development programmes.



The commitment statement is in the process of endorsement and the workshop report will be made available on the Biowatch and SPP websites. The statement broadly outlines a research agenda to promote agro-ecological approaches, awareness and popular education, coalition building and alternative strategies, and to mobilise against adverse agriculture policies

4. Update on Limpopo and KwaZulu-Natal activities

Maria Mphahlele, Biowatch staff member in Limpopo, organised a field trip so that Rose Williams and David Fig, Chairperson of the Biowatch Board, could meet with various players associated with Biowatch’s work in Limpopo. The group met with the municipality of Mokopane, the small-scale farmers from Phadima, the seed bank at Mohlaletse, and then with Dr Johan Minnaar in Groblersdal to discuss the role of Biowatch in this area – where farmland contaminated with agricultural pesticides and herbicides threatens community health.

Lawrence Mkhalihi and Samu Sithole work with household food security gardens in Ngwavuma, Phongola and Makhathini in northern KwaZulu-Natal. They also hosted four people from ABN (African Biodiversity Network) and Pelum Kenya, in Bizana in the Eastern Cape, giving training on seed banks and agro-ecological food production.

With Rose Williams, they met with Broederlijk Delen partners, including AFRA, SPP (Surplus People Project) and ACAT in

Mtubatuba - visiting household food gardens, and Entweni School in KwaHoho (Mtubatuba) where Biowatch has been working on food security for many years. Then to Ngwavuma to show Vini Bhansali from the International Development Exchange (IDEX), Biowatch’s work. Based in San Francisco they support sustainable solutions to poverty by providing long-term grants and resources to organisations in Africa, Asia and Latin America.



Samu Sithole at Mrs Mcwango's homestead in Ngwavuma

5. Biowatch holds workshop in the Eastern Cape

“Will the Massive Food Production Programme (MFPP) and GMOs solve the food security situation in the Eastern Cape?”

This was the subject of a well-attended public meeting held in East London on 15 April. In response to the government supported agricultural programmes, the MFPP and Agrofuel (Biofuels) production for export, participants discussed definitions of food security, as well as alternatives to industrial agriculture “solutions”.

This meeting and a later research partners’ meeting raised a number of concerns about these programmes. Some participants felt that the programmes, which are largely market based and profit-seeking, undermine rural development.

They would also affect social well-being and prevent access to production resources for the poorest of the poor. Major concern was expressed about the top-down nature of these programmes. Communities and small-scale farmers are often not in a position to make well-informed choices and the

consequences of these programmes; particularly the MFPP have been largely negative. The MFPP programme could result in increased debt amongst small farmers and the dispossession of their land.

Many farmers do not understand the nature of hybrid or GMO seeds, which have initially been given to them for “free”, but having to be purchased thereafter. A farmer from the Siyazakha organisation expressed dismay at the quality of mielies (maize) produced with these ‘free’ seeds. She stated: The mielies produced are making us sick; they break easily and are bad quality. When we give it to our chickens it affects them. We want to grow our own seeds and protect them”.

Another small-scale farmer from Siyazakha, raised the problem of using fertilisers that destroy the soil after a few years so that food can no longer be grown on it. He stressed that they want to use manure and to produce crops using traditional farming methods.

6. Biowatch represented at the World Social Forum

Biowatch’s research, policy and advocacy coordinator, Michelle Pressend represented Biowatch and AIDC at the World Social Forum in the city of Belém, Brasil from 26-29 February 2009.

Her article “The World Social Forum trumps the World Economic Forum on solutions for a better world” is available on the South African Civil Society Information Service (SACSIS) website:

<http://www.sacsis.org.za/site/article/234.1>



7. Voices from Africa: farmers and environmentalists speak out against AGRA – “a new Green Revolution in Africa”

This excellent new report from the Oakland Institute directly challenges Western-led plans for a genetically engineered revolution in African agriculture, particularly the recent misguided philanthropic efforts of the Gates Foundation's pet project, Alliance for a New Green Revolution in Africa (AGRA). It also presents African resistance and solutions rooted in first-hand knowledge of what Africans need. (Oaklands Institute, 2009).

Writers include Mariam Mayet, African Centre for Biodiversity (ACB), South Africa; Nnimmo Bassey, Environmental Rights Action (ERA), Nigeria; David Fig, Biowatch, South Africa;

Mukoma Wa Ngugi, BBC Focus on Africa Magazine; Makhathe Moahloli, Katleho Moho Association (KMA), Lesotho; Zachary Makanya, Participatory Ecological Land Use Management Association (PELUM), Kenya; and Gertrude Kenyangi Kabusimbi, Support for Women in Agriculture and Environment (SWAGEN), Uganda.

Download the report at:

http://www.oaklandinstitute.org/voicesfromafrica/pdfs/voicesfromafrica_full.pdf

8. Sign on to the GE maize crop failure petition



Diversity in traditional maize varieties

Three varieties of Monsanto's GM maize have failed to produce crops during the 2008/9 growing season, reportedly leaving up to 200 000 hectares with barren cobs.

The African Centre for Biosafety has initiated a petition calling for an independent scientific investigation into GM crop failure and the establishment of an independent monitoring panel.

Support this petition at

<http://www.activist.co.za/campaigns/2009/investigategm.php>

FOR COMMENTS AND QUERIES OR MORE INFORMATION GO TO
www.biowatch.org.za

