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## PRESS RELEASE

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## **87 Countries Agree to New International Protections from Genetic Contamination Agreement Will Force U.S. Exporters To Label GE Foods**

KUALA LUMPUR, Malaysia – Eighty-seven countries reached an historic agreement here today that takes concrete steps towards establishing new, internationally recognized rights to protect public health, sustainable agricultural production and the environment from genetic contamination caused by international trade in genetically engineered (GE) organisms.

“Although the steps taken were modest - addressing liability, labeling and information-sharing related to the international shipping of GE organisms - the consensus reached by the parties to the Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety represented a sharp rebuff to the Bush Administration’s intensive behind-the-scenes lobbying efforts to undermine the treaty through a coalition of the bribed and bullied,” said Dennis Olson of the Minneapolis-based Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy, referring to a few countries like Canada, Mexico, Brazil and Argentina who often acted as US proxies during the five days of negotiations.

The U.S. has refused to sign the treaty, but nevertheless sent a large lobbying delegation that worked hand-in-hand with industry lobbyists, and other major GE exporting countries, to oppose language in the treaty that would strengthen the legal standing and capacity of countries to prevent the illegal entry of unapproved GE organisms into their farm fields, environment and food supply. “The delegates deserve much praise for withstanding the relentless U.S. led pressure to water down the treaty, and for sticking to their guns to protect the health of their citizens, the rights of their farmers, and the integrity of their ecosystems,” Olson said.

“The U.S. wanted to prevent any further specificity in the type of documentation that could be required of importers under the Protocol to identify genetically engineered organisms entering another country,” said Olson. For example, the U.S. tried to restrict the treaty language to require anything beyond a commercial invoice from the shipping company that simply stated that a shipment “may contain” genetically engineered organisms. This “may contain” language was negotiated in the initial treaty - but also mandated the reconsideration of this limited requirement at the meeting held this week. The final language allows for countries to require a more detailed stand alone document.

The treaty now also delineates another key piece of information an importing country may require: a description of the “transformation event code” of the GE organism being imported. The U.S. tried to block this language, which would have made it much more difficult to trace the GE organism back to the biotech company who created it. Allowing this transformation event code to be used will make it easier to assess liability when GE organisms are illegally imported into a country and cause damage to human health, agricultural production (e.g., organic production), or the environment.

A 15-member committee has been established to monitor compliance with the protocol, while a group of legal and technical experts will develop regulations by 2008 covering liability and redress for damages resulting from trans-boundary movements of genetically engineered organisms.

Olson also criticized the Bush Administration for lobbying almost exclusively on behalf of the biotech industry at the expense of many U.S. farmers who oppose further expansion of GE crops.

“Many U.S. wheat farmers oppose the introduction of Monsanto’s GE wheat out of respect for their customers in Europe and Asia who have said that they don’t want it,” Olson noted. “Additionally, organic farmers face being put completely out of business from unchecked GE contamination of their crops, and they represent the fastest growing agricultural sector in the United States. The Bush Administration failed to represent the interests of these farmers in its all out effort on behalf of multinational biotech corporations to undermine this landmark protocol.”

The treaty appears to give the European Union some cover in a World Trade Organization (WTO) case filed by the U.S. regarding genetically engineered foods. That case, expected to be decided sometime this summer, challenges the EU’s tough regulatory system for GE foods. The Biosafety Protocol re-asserts nations rights to regulate and reject GE foods for import.

More information on the Biosafety Protocol can be found at the United Nations Environment Program web page: <http://www.unep.org/>

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