



INSTITUTE FOR AGRICULTURE AND TRADE POLICY
2105 FIRST AVENUE SOUTH
MINNEAPOLIS, MINNESOTA 55404 USA

PRESS RELEASE

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Contact: Ben Lilliston, 202-223-3740, blilliston@iatp.org

International Plant Genetics Treaty Goes Into Effect Tomorrow

Treaty Protects Farmers Rights, U.S. Yet to Ratify

Minneapolis - A groundbreaking new international treaty that validates farmers rights to save seeds will go into effect tomorrow, June 29. The "International Treaty on Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture" establishes a multilateral system providing public access to seeds and germplasm for much of the world's food supply, as well as fair and equitable sharing of the benefits. The Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy (IATP) is calling on the Bush Administration to bring the treaty before Congress for ratification.

"Protection of the world's food supply depends on the broadest possible distribution of seeds," said Kristin Dawkins, Vice President of International Programs at IATP. "Genetic diversity is the key to healthy crops, and this global program to include farmers in the effort to ensure widespread cross-fertilization through the exchange of seed is vital. It is time for the U.S. to join the rest of the world in protecting farmers rights to save, use, exchange and sell farm-saved seed."

Of the 10,000 species that have been used for human food and agriculture, just 12 provide over 70 percent of food, while four -- rice, maize, wheat and potatoes -- make up over 50 percent of the food supply. Farmers around the world, particularly in developing countries, routinely save seeds and view the practice as critical to their survival.

The issue of saving seeds and keeping them in the public domain has become increasingly important with the introduction of genetically engineered seeds. In the U.S., biotech companies like Monsanto have filed hundreds of legal cases against farmers alleging that they saved the company's patented genetically engineered seeds from one growing season to the next. The biotech industry maintains that their seeds are intellectual property that must be used in the year purchased. If the U.S. ratified the treaty, it would not give U.S. farmers the right to save seeds. It allows that national laws can supersede the Treaty, and current U.S. law does not protect farmers in this regard. But the treaty does empower other countries to set domestic laws that protect farmers' right to save seeds.

"Many countries in Africa, Asia and South America are grappling with whether to accept genetically engineered crops," says Dawkins. "As these countries establish their regulatory systems, this treaty gives them legal standing to pass protections for their farmers when it comes to saving seeds."

In this respect, the treaty runs head-long into the World Trade Organization (WTO)'s agreement on Trade-Related Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPs) - which sets international rules that protect intellectual property. Another recent international treaty, the Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety, gives nations the right to set their own strong regulatory standards for genetically engineered crops. That treaty conflicts with a current WTO dispute between the U.S. and Europe over the European Union's regulatory system for genetically engineered crops.

"These U.N. treaties to protect the world's food supply and environment should not be over-ruled by the WTO's commercial priorities," says Dawkins. "How these conflicts between different international laws are resolved is one of the major challenges of this decade."

The full treaty can be read at: www.fao.org/ag/cgrfa/itpgr.htm.

The Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy promotes resilient family farms, rural communities and ecosystems around the world through research and education, science and technology, and advocacy.