Holland: GM poplars to grow next door

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- Genetically Engineered Trees [1]

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Researchers at the Ghent, Belgium based Flanders Institute of Biotechnology (VIB) have gained ground in a long-running battle over the planting of genetically modified (GM) poplar trees by applying for permits to plant the trees across the border. The Belgian government initially refused VIB's application to run field trials on home turf, but now the Dutch government, which has already issued a positive opinion, may grant them permission.

The transgenic poplars are deficient in the enzyme cinnamoyl-CoA reductase, which reduces the lignin content making them more suitable for bioethanol production, although so far their benefits have only been demonstrated in the lab. The VIB had hoped for a green light from the Belgian Biosafety Council to run the trials closer to its research facilities and pilot-scale biorefinery. Instead, researchers will be forced to make regular trips to neighboring Holland to monitor and harvest the trees.

Willy De Greef, secretary general of EuropaBio, the Brussels-based association for European bioindustry, says,"VIB is a public institute, which doesn't have the resources of a multinational. I don't even dare to think about what it does to their annual research budget". He says if European laws governing the planting of GM field trials were more consistently adhered to across member states, such situations wouldn't arise. A final decision from the Dutch government is due in spring 2009. Hayley Birch

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