Institute of Forest Biotechnology
Science • Dialogue • Stewardship

Responsible Use: Forest Biotechnology Principles

-- An Initiative of the Institute of Forest Biotechnology --

The world needs principles to use biotech trees responsibly
The Responsible Use initiative will help protect the future of our forests. The Institute of Forest Biotechnology (IFB) will manage the development of principles for biotech trees* by working with Initiative Sponsors, Forest Biotechnology Partners, experts from around the world, and any interested stakeholder.

Biotechnology is a powerful tool being used to grow trees with special characteristics. When used responsibly society and the environment can benefit from these technologies, such as genetic modification, to improve forest health and grow more fiber on less land. Currently there are no principles to ensure the long-term stewardship of biotech trees. Sustainable forest management schemes, government regulatory mechanisms, and voluntary programs all need these principles to protect the future of our forests.

An unprecedented amount of resources are going into biotech tree research to meet demands for cellulosic fuel production and protecting against invasive threats. A revolution in forestry will begin in the next few years. To date three genetically modified tree species - papaya, plum, and poplar - have legally been planted in the U.S. and China. Biotech trees will be planted extensively throughout the world to meet social and environmental demands. However, there are no long-term principles guiding the stewardship of these trees. Society needs a mechanism to determine which uses of biotech trees will bring benefit and which might cause harm to enhance the benefits of these trees while minimizing risks.

*** Biotech Trees:**
The IFB defines biotech trees as those developed using asexual propagation (commonly known as cloning), or genetic engineering (also called genetic modification).

Society demands sustainability
We need sustainably grown and harvested trees for communication, packaging, housing, food, and renewable energy. Currently the world does not have enough sustainably managed forests to fill all these needs. Instead we have illegal logging, land being converted from forests to sprawling housing developments, and an onslaught of invasive threats damaging the health of our forests. Forest biotechnology is a powerful tool against these threats.

Everyone in the value chain from biotech tree researchers to the forest products industry to consumers bear high risks if there is no set of Responsible Use principles – whether they favor the use of biotech trees or not. For example, there is no doubt that these trees can economically produce large quantities of fiber. Yet production supply chain costs will be higher if consumers demand that biotech tree products are treated differently due to a lack of science-based principles ensuring stewardship of these advanced trees.

Society cannot yet conclude that the use of biotech trees is sustainable. The proliferation of sustainable forestry certification schemes shows that the public places a high value on responsible management of natural resources and the well being of forest ecosystems. The Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) currently bans the use of genetically modified trees. This ban has consequences for organizations wishing to maintain FSC certification while wanting to growing more fiber on less land or combating invasive threats with biotech trees. Outright bans should be expected to continue without principles that guide long-term stewardship of biotech trees. Through science, dialogue, and stewardship the IFB will lead the development of science-based principles from multiple stakeholders including any interested person.

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Initiative Scope:
The IFB is managing the development of Responsible Use Forest Biotechnology Principles that:

- Will help determine responsible uses of forest biotechnology
- Is highly transparent, multi-stakeholder driven, and global
- Can not be used in place of sustainable forestry practices because it is not a certification scheme; but could be used to complement other certification mechanisms
- Will compliment regulations of biotech trees, not supercede them
- Includes the entire value chain of biotech trees with principle-based verifiable elements
- Will create teaching material to educate young students - forest stewards of the future
- Is designed to evolve with the science of biotechnology, societal demands on trees, and sustainable resource management techniques

The principles will be robust and structured so organizations can verify their adherence to the guidelines, but no certification mechanism is planned in this scope.

Process and Management: This initiative will be managed and produced by the Institute of Forest Biotechnology. An Implementation Committee will assimilate information from stakeholders in a strong bottom-up driven process. Experts for this committee will be drawn from every continent in the fields of academia, tree growers and users, public interest, environmental, and government. Forest Biotechnology Partners, and any interested stakeholder can also play a significant role in the course of this initiative. The IFB and its Initiative Sponsors will guide the process through strategic planning, guideline development, and real-world testing. The final set of principles will be launched in 2009 accompanying a management framework for the ongoing improvement of the initiative.

Update 08/2008: We have met with many environmental organizations and are now soliciting Implementation Committee members to play a central role in the development of the Responsible Use initiative. Please visit the Responsible Use website or contact the IFB for additional information on how to apply

Contact:
Please contact us for additional information, ways to sponsor this initiative, stakeholder engagement opportunities, or if you have ideas to strengthen the Responsible Use initiative.

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Responsible Use website: www.responsibleuse.org
Institute of Forest Biotechnology website: www.forestbiotech.org
Forest Biotechnology Partnership: www.partners.forstbiotech.org