USDA APHIS Virtual Meeting on Freeze Tolerant Eucalyptus, April 18, 2013

Susan Wheatley: Good evening, my name is Susan Wheatley, your technical support for this podcast. Welcome to the second of two virtual public meetings, sponsored by the U.S. Department of Agriculture Animal Implant Health Inspection Service. First I would like to go over a few housekeeping items. This virtual meeting uses audio broadcast technology. As an attendee, you will be able to hear the panelists and presenters, but we are not able to hear you. If you are registered to speak today, you have been sent separate instructions on how to connect to this meeting so that you will be heard when it is your turn to provide your public comment.

You should see a welcome slide on the left side of your screen; on the right side you will see the panelists via webcam, the names of the panelists who will be conducting the meeting and your name. You will not see the names of the other attendees.

There are several blue bars called panels along the right side of your screen. (Inaudible) chat and media viewer. You can open and close these panels by using the small half arrows next to the panel title. If you experience difficulty joining the WebEx session, please contact WebEx Technical Support at 1-866-229-3239. This number will also appear on all the slides used in this meeting. If you are registered to speak on today's call, please be sure you are dialed in via a phone line. If you see a phone icon next to your name in the participant panel. If you do not see a phone icon, please disconnect with your phone only and redial in, making sure to enter the attendee ID slowly. You must have a phone next to your name in order for you to provide a public comment.

If you are having a technical difficulty during the meetings, such as with your panels, please use the chat panel located in the lower right corner of your screen to send me a communication. You can also use the green toolbar on the edge of your screen if viewing in full screen mode. Type in your questions in the text field and hit send. I will respond as promptly as possible. Please keep the send to default as all panelists. With that, we invite you to sit back, relax, and enjoy today's presentation. Without further delay, I will hand the broadcast off to Dick George.

Dick George: Thank you, welcome and thank you for joining us. I am Dick George, Communications Branch Chief at Biotechnology Regulatory Services, or BRS. BRS is part of APHIS, the Animal Plant and Health Inspection Service, an agency of the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Soliciting public comments is a very important part of our process. We value your input and are pleased that you have chosen to be with us today, either to make a public comment or to listen to the comments of others. Technicians are standing by to assist anyone having difficulties in accessing this virtual meeting. Please call 1-866-229-3239 for help. This number is at the bottom of each slide. On the left side of your screen you should see the slide that is currently displayed for the meeting. On the right side you should see the projection of me and my colleague, Rebecca Stankiewicz Gabel. You will also notice that there are other panels that you can navigate such as the media viewer. To access closed captioning for this meeting, open the media viewer to the right of your screen. I will repeat that, to access closed captioning, open the media viewer to the right of your screen.

The purpose of this meeting is to solicit your comments on a notice of intent to do an Environmental Impact Statement or EIS for a line of eucalyptus that has been genetically engineered to be tolerant of freezing temperatures. For more information on this eucalyptus go to www.APHISVirtualMeetings.com. This slide contains background information, and also links to other documents and websites.

In the past, we have traveled around the country to conduct meetings where interested parties can make public comments on our various regulatory actions. Now, for the first time, we are holding online virtual public meetings to allow more people the opportunity to comment. Joining me is Dr. Rebecca Stankiewicz Gabel my colleague at BRS. Rebecca is the supervisor of our Biotechnology Environmental Analysis Branch.

Dr. Rebecca Stankiewicz Gabel: Before we start taking comments from our online audience, we would like to go over some of the specifics for the virtual meeting. We are taking only spoken comments today. If you prefer to make a written comment, you can do so by going to www.regulations.gov. Enter the word "eucalyptus" in the search box. This will take you to a link for the freeze tolerant eucalyptus comment site. The public comment period ends on April 29, 2013. You can go to regulations.gov anytime between now and the 29th and leave a written comment, which will become part of the public record. Or you can make a comment here at our meeting which will go until 6:00 p.m. tonight eastern time.

Those of you wishing to speak today will be recognized in the order in which you were registered. Today we are here to receive your input, not to answer questions about eucalyptus. For background information, please go to www.APHISVirtualMeeting.com. If you did not already register to speak and you wish to do so, please click on the raised hand icon. This will indicate that you wish to speak and you will be placed in the queue. You will be provided with instructions on how to proceed through the chat feature.

The statements received during the public comment period, whether spoken here today, or provided in writing to regulations.gov, will be considered in the development of the draft EIS for freeze tolerant eucalyptus. After we have published the draft EIS, we will solicit and receive comments on it. Those comments will be considered in the development of the final EIS. After the final EIS is published, there will be a decision on the regulatory status of freeze tolerant eucalyptus. We welcome your comments today because they will help us to determine what issues to consider as we prepare our draft and environmental impact statement.

Dick George: You should see a list of commenters and the order in which they will speak on your screen so you will know when your turn is approaching. We ask that you keep your comments to three minutes or less. Once everyone who wants to speak has done so, if we have extra time and you would like to say more, we will glad to afford you that opportunity. A recording of this meeting will be available within 48 hours on our site which is www.APHISVirtualMeeting.com. And written transcripts will be available there within a few weeks.

At the conclusion of the meeting, a survey will appear on the screen. Please complete it before you log off. Your feedback is very important to us. If you would like to be seen as well as heard today, please turn on your webcam when it is your turn to speak, and click on the camera icon next to your name. If you are having technical difficulties call the technical support team at 1-866-229-3239. As a reminder, we are here to receive your comments only, not to answer questions on eucalyptus or to discuss or debate biotechnology. With that, we are ready to hear from any commenter who is ready to speak and the first person on our list I think, I am looking at the screen here to get a queue as to whether we have a commenter who is ready quite yet to speak. Do we have Madelynn Frazier or Michael Portereiko. If we could – Michael Portereiko, if your mic is open, you can go ahead. It may take a moment to unmute his phone.

Dr. Rebecca Stankiewicz Gabel: Michael, are you on the line?

Dick George: Michael Portereiko, are you there?

Michael Portereiko: Yes we are here actually, we were just on the list to listen. We do not have any prepared comments at this time.

Dick George: Okay, thank you. Is there anyone else who would like to comment? Ann Peterman, are you there, if so let us know.

Ann Peterman: Yes, can you hear me?

Dick George: Yes, we certainly can.

Dr. Rebecca Stankiewicz Gabel: Yes we can.

Dick George: If you would like to go ahead with your comment, please do.

Ann Peterman: Okay, just one moment. Alright, I guess I would like to point out that this environmental impact statement for this genetically engineered eucalyptus represents the first time that APHIS has prepared a full environmental impact statement on a genetically engineered plant without being forced to by litigation. And it is only the fourth time that APHIS has prepared an environmental impact statement for any GE plant. Previously the agency was forced by litigation to prepare an environmental impact statement for alfalfa, beets and bent grass. And I think what that means is that APHIS is aware that this genetically engineered eucalyptus is potentially very dangerous and could have severe environmental impacts, and that is the fact that there is overwhelming public opposition to them. So I hope that that means that APHIS will take this very seriously and not rubber stamp these genetically engineered eucalyptus.

They are not native to the United States, eucalyptus of any kind, and they are also a documented invasive species. They are highly flammable, they are known to deplete ground water, and the freeze tolerant eucalyptus will be able to escape into ecosystems that previously have been too cold for them. So that makes them very dangerous in addition to the very – the other impacts that eucalyptus plantations already have as we know from the impacts that eucalyptus plantations have had elsewhere in the world, which all the impacts include clear cutting of bio-diverse forests for conversion to industrial eucalyptus plantations in Brazil. These are called green deserts because they have no bio-diversity at all. In Chile they are called green soldiers because they are constantly increasing and on the march forward, taking over more and more land. In South Africa they are called green cancer because people cannot control their spread, they are constantly being found in ecosystems where they were not planted.

They are documented as invasive in Florida and California. They increase the danger of firestorms. They contain a highly volatile oil and are explosively flammable. They displace wildlife that cannot use the eucalyptus trees for habitat or food and in addition, some eucalyptus trees are known to actually glue the beaks of birds together and kill them. They contaminate soil and ground water with the toxic agro chemicals that are used on them. And they are worse in droughts, they have deep tap roots and monopolize ground water and dry up soils. And all of this put together means that they will worsen climate change through the destruction of carbon rich native forests for carbon poor plantations. One study found that timber plantations actually contain about one-quarter the carbon of a native forest. So that is good for my comments for now.

Dr. Rebecca Stankiewicz Gabel: Thank you for your comments.

Dick George: Thank you, we have Keith Brunner on the line, Keith, are you there.

Keith Brunner: Hello Dick, can you hear me?

Dick George: I sure can, please go ahead.

Keith Brunner: Great, so my name is Keith Brunner, I am here today to call on the USDA to deny this permit from ArborGen. Eucalyptus trees are introduced organisms here in the U.S. and they are documented as invasive pests in parts of California and Florida. This cold tolerant trait that we are discussing today, would vastly expand the range of GE eucalyptus trees. And so hence it would enhance its ability to invade native ecosystems which is seriously problematic for bio-diversity as well as for ecosystem resiliency in the face of catastrophic climate change that we are facing.

Our experience in California and other parts of the world has shown that when eucalyptus escapes it is near impossible to eradicate them. And I wanted to include a quote from the renowned geneticist David Suzuki, I quote. "We have no control over the movement of insects, birds and mammals, wind and rain that carry pollen and seeds, genetically engineered trees with the potential to transfer pollen for hundreds of miles carrying genes for tracing, including insect resistance, herbicide resistance, sterility and released lignin, thus have the potential to wreak ecological havoc throughout the world's native forests." And as was mentioned, approval of GE eucalyptus would open the door for other GE tree species.

Also as was mentioned, GE trees are green deserts. They are an industrial plantation of trees, tree plantation, especially of GE trees, is like an industrial army of trees that will wipe out all of the life around them. These have major impacts on bio-diversity, particularly, these trees the cold-tolerant eucalyptus trees are being targeted for the forests of the southern U.S., and these are some of the most bio-diverse forests in the world. They have species found nowhere else including the Louisiana Black Bear, the Golden Cheeked Warbler, and the Red-Cockaded Woodpecker. These are species that could be pushed over the edge if millions of acres of GE Eucalyptus plantations are developed. They are also – eucalyptus trees are known to soak up more water than the forest that evolves naturally here, which threatens creeks and rivers. And the endangered freshwater species that live in them.

I also wanted to talk about the fact that there is enormous public opposition, not only in the United States, but internationally, to genetically engineered trees as well as to eucalyptus plantations. The last time that APHIS took comments on the test plots, there were tens of thousands of comments opposed to the field trials, and there were only 50 in favor. So that tells if it is something about where the public stands, and in this democracy of course, it should be a participatory process and it should be absolutely included in our decision making. I also wanted to highlight in 2006 this sort of, this story sort of encapsulates some of their resistance to eucalyptus plantations that occurs internationally. In 2006, on March 8, 2000 women from La Via Campesina, occupied the plantation of Aracruz Celulose which is now Fibria in Brazil, and Rio Grande do Sul on a Wednesday, and they occupied this plantation to denounce the social and environmental impacts of these green deserts created by eucalyptus monoculture. Now this was a massive even in Brazilian politics caused by the expansion of eucalyptus monocultures. And I quote from La Via Campesina from the women, "We are against green deserts, the enormous plantations of eucalyptus that cover thousands of hectáreas in Brazil and Latin America when the green desert advances, bio-diversity is destroyed, soil deteriorates, and rivers dry up. Moreover, these plants pollute air and water and threaten human health." So that is what we will see here in the U.S. South is what has happened internationally, and that is why I am calling on APHIS to not submit – to deny this permit to Arbor Gen Corp cold tolerant eucalyptus trees. Thank you, I am done.

Dr. Rebecca Stankiewicz Gabel: Thank you for your comments. Do we have anyone else on the line?

Dick George: We have no one else lined up at the moment to speak. I would mention to those who are listening in if perhaps you have decided that you would like to make a comment, you could still do so. You need to click on the raised hand icon on your screen, and you will receive instructions through the chat feature on how to make a comment. So since we have no others signed up at the moment, we do receive a signal from our WebEx producer when someone is on the line and ready to speak. So what we will do, we will take a pause. We encourage those listening, if you have a comment, please do so the way I just described. And in the meantime, we will take a pause, and if we have no others who come on, we will come back on every five minutes or so just to let folks know that we are still here. We plan on being here until 6:00 p.m. today, so if someone comes on this meeting late, they will still have the opportunity to make a comment.

So having said that, I will take a pause and if we get a signal that we have someone else who is ready to speak, we will come back on and receive that comment. So we will take a pause right here, thank you.

Dr. Rebecca Stankiewicz Gabel: Thank you.

Dick George: Okay, we have someone who would like to make a comment. It is Rachel Smolker, please forgive me if I have mispronounced your name, Rachel are you there?

Rachel Smolker: Hi, I am here.

Dick George: Terrific, go ahead with your comment.

Rachel Smolker: Okay. I had a little trouble getting onto the call so I am not sure what had already been said or not. But I wanted to comment on two things. First of all, the organization that I work with does a lot of work on the impacts of large scale bio-energy on climate and on human rights and on food and we do not support the position that was in this petition that this is – that large scale bio energy is a great socio-economic benefit to people. Because in fact the demand for land, to produce enough biomass to make any kind of significant contribution to our energy demand as it is right now, is astronomical. And we cannot meet more than a very small portion of our energy demand from trees or any other source that requires large amount of land and water like eucalyptus would. So that is one point, the other point I would like to bring up, in the petition, the issue of Cryptococcus, which is a fungal pathogen that causes fungal meningitis and is becoming global epidemic at this point. It is a major cause of death for a lot of patients with AIDS. It also infects people who are immunocompetent that does not have any compromised immune system in different places.

It was initially discovered in Australia associated with eucalyptus species, and we brought this up in the process where decision about field testing these eucalyptus, and it was dismissed because it was found that there are other trees that also host this Cryptococcus fungus. That is not a good basis for dismissing it in my opinion because just because there are other trees that are also host, Cryptococcus is not a plant of favored host over wide swathes of the United States. It is rather foolhardy actually.

In a letter to the USDA at that time, Dr. Heitman who is from Duke University, wrote, in summary there is a possibility that exporting or planting large numbers of eucalyptus trees could create a novel environmental niche for human pathogen that causes infections of the lungs and the central nervous system that can be difficult to treat, exhibit drug resistance and can be fatal. So I think it is immature to be dismissing the issue of Cryptococcus setting the possibility of setting up widespread habitat for that fungal pathogen by planting eucalyptus over a much extended range with these genetically engineered trees.

The other issue I wanted to bring up was is around pests, having looked a little bit at what was here in the petition about the various test species. I just want to say that I really want to say that it was really quite impossible to predict what kinds of pests will be attracted to massive plantings of eucalyptus in the United States. Plantings elsewhere are not necessarily indicative because there are different plants and plant pests traveling around in different parts of the world. I just want to read a brief portion from an abstract of a paper that was published in 2010 which was about the introduction of pests to eucalyptus in California. The paper that this was from was published in the journal of economical entomology, accumulation of pest insect on eucalyptus in California, random process or smoking gun. Timothy Paine, Jocelyn Millar, and Kent, M. Daane. These are folks from the University of California. The main point is that between 1983 and 2008, an additional 16 Australian insect pests of eucalyptus have become established in that state. Others prior to that. The modes or routes of introduction have never been established, and I just highlight that. We do not know, we cannot tell, there is no way of controlling the travel and transport of these pests. However, examinations, different temporal spatial patterns suggest the introductions were non random processes. And it goes on to say that the precautionary approach to these things and the risks associated with large scale planting of something like that.

And so, one of my questions is what are the environment impacts going to be of having large areas planted with this eucalyptus if we have no idea really what kinds of pests, we cannot really pretend that we know, and what kinds of controls are going to be used, what kinds of chemicals will have to be sprayed in order to control those pests when they inevitably do arrive. So that is my comments, thank you.

Dick George: Thank you so much for your comment. We do not have another speaker scheduled to speak at the moment, but we will, as I said before, we are here until 6:00 so if anyone else would like to speak, perhaps someone who is on the line who has been listening in, just click on the raised hand icon to do so, you will get instructions on the chat feature. And if someone does decide they would like to make a comment, we will come back online as quickly as we can to receive that comment. So otherwise, we will see you, if we do not hear from anyone else, we will close the meeting right before 6:00, so we will see you in about 15 minutes if not before. And if we have someone who wants to speak in the meantime, we will be back on as quickly as we can. Thank you so much.

We would like to thank everyone who participated today in our virtual meeting on freeze tolerant eucalyptus. Our PowerPoint and audio of this virtual meeting will be available on our website, www.APHISVirtualMeeting.com within 48 hours. Please do not log off before completing our survey, it will appear on your screen following the meeting. Please fill it out and then click the submit button. We will be posting information, including dates and times of future virtual meetings at our website, www.APHISVirtualMeeting.com. Thanks again for joining us for this virtual meeting. For Rebecca and myself, we appreciate you being here and your comments. And also those who just attended. As of now, this virtual meeting is now concluded, thanks so much.

Dr. Rebecca Stankiewicz Gabel: Good night.