

Thousands of pages of DivSeek internal e-mails released, offering detailed insight into the controversial agricultural “big data” project

by **Edward Hammond**

After 18 months of Freedom of Information requests on Diversity Seek, or DivSeek (divseek.org), the controversial international agricultural genomics project, a trove of over 3,000 new pages of internal DivSeek e-mails and other documents has been published online.

The new release primarily consists of records from the University of British Columbia (UBC) in Vancouver, Canada, where DivSeek co-founder Loren Rieseberg is based. They include records of an attorney that works for Rieseberg and heads DivSeek’s Governance Committee.

UBC was the most reluctant and evasive of a number of North American institutions that received open records requests on their participation in DivSeek. UBC staff sought to avoid public accountability by using private

e-mail servers and other tactics to evade accountability under the law. UBC still has not released all DivSeek-related records that were requested. The Information and Privacy Commissioner of British Columbia has opened an investigation.

In the new release, over 2,000 pages from UBC are supplemented by records from the University of Georgia (UGA) in the United States, where another self-described DivSeek founder and other participants are based. These two releases join previously available e-mails and other documents from DivSeek participants including the Universities of Texas and Minnesota and the US Department of Agriculture.

Together, the extensive DivSeek records offer a frank and unvarnished view into the planning and activities of key players in the

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project, revealing many things that DivSeek's leaders clearly would have preferred to keep behind closed doors.

Foremost, the records reveal DivSeek as a project working to avoid access and benefit sharing (ABS) laws and principles in relation to use of genetic sequence data of farmers' varieties ("landraces") and other food crop diversity they intend to genetically sequence.

With funding from Genome Canada, UBC set out to cultivate relationships between DivSeek and the seed industry with a shared aim of identifying and exploiting potential weaknesses in the International Treaty on Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture (ITPGRFA) and the UN Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) in relation to genetic sequence data of crops and crop wild relatives.

Indeed, even while DivSeek publicly represented itself as desirous of compliance with ITPGRFA and the CBD, the records reveal DivSeek principals – remarkably but unequivocally including the Global Crop Diversity Trust – worked behind the scenes to sideline the ITPGRFA from DivSeek because its participation appeared to entail due consideration of ABS and the rights of farmers in relation to gene sequences, something that DivSeek and industry both wanted to avoid.

E-mails exchanged between UBC, the Crop Trust and others in the course of their conspiracy to isolate the Treaty rail against the ITPGRFA. The documents repeatedly contain personally disparaging remarks about Treaty staff that the UBC Legal Counsel was obligated to redact (black out) under Canadian law that protects the dignity of persons mentioned in government records.

In contrast, communications from Treaty staff to DivSeek members contain no such remarks and indicate the ITPGRFA Secretariat was acting consistently with the principles of the Treaty and the decisions of its Governing Body.

And while DivSeek presented itself to the world as separate from industry, the records reveal that global seed giants clamoured to build relations with DivSeek, offering money. One company, Syngenta, was involved in DivSeek from the very start of the project.

The records show that in the judgment of DivSeek leaders, industry's agenda included collaborating with DivSeek to advance a goal of releasing genetic sequence data from ABS requirements – in effect positioning genebanks, research professors and industry to enjoy the financial fruits of mining international and other seed banks for valuable sequences, while leaving farmers, indigenous peoples and developing-country governments behind.

Not only were DivSeek leaders more often than not agreeable to industry's intent, but at least in the cases of UBC and UGA, DivSeek members sought to profit by selling to industry giants both early access to sequences and patent rights to DivSeek-affiliated projects. Such offers were made even while DivSeek publicly claimed that its research would be "precompetitive" and hence removed from the proprietary realm.

Turbulence from such revelations and internal discord – for instance, not all DivSeek members enthusiastically embraced the seed industry – have caused DivSeek to enter into a period of reorganization. The ITPGRFA has terminated its association with DivSeek, as recently highlighted by the farmers' organization La Via Campesina, which is

calling on other DivSeek partners to quit the project (see Via Campesina news release of 10 February 2017 at: <http://goo.gl/OJ2o44>).

DivSeek's internal structures, however, have become more opaque. As documented in the records, DivSeek principals reacted to Freedom of Information requests by moving their discussions to alternative e-mail addresses and other formats, specifically in order to avoid transparency. The US Department of Agriculture's representative in DivSeek dropped out of a formal role in the project's governance because of the "problem" that the US Freedom of Information Act posed.

The staff member of the Global Crop Diversity Trust that led the Crop Trust's efforts to sideline the ITPGRFA and suffocate ABS concerns on gene sequences, who stated to colleagues in published e-mails that the Executive Director of the Crop Trust approved of his activities, has left the Crop Trust for a new job. Now at the International Center for Tropical Agriculture (CIAT) in Cali, Colombia, he is again at the helm of an agricultural "big data" project, this time for the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR).

With working groups at both the ITPGRFA and CBD poised to consider the implications of genetic sequence data at upcoming meetings, the focus of policy discussion is appropriately moving towards the appropriate multilateral bodies. It remains to be seen, and civil society organizations will remain vigilant, whether projects like DivSeek and others that seek to 'digitize' international and other genebanks, respect treaty obligations and the rights of farmers and indigenous peoples.

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To access the records referred to above, go to <http://www.pricklyresearch.com/AutoIndex/index.php?dir=DivSeek/>
(or: <http://goo.gl/EyBb5n>)