GMO Insight
Your gateway to biotechnology news
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African Biosafety Regulators urged to strengthen links

NEPAD Agency African Biosafety Network of Expertise (ABNE), in collaboration with AfricaBio, hosted a group of regulators and journalists, from 12 African countries in Pretoria, South Africa, from 10 - 18 May 2012. The event was attended by biosafety regulators from Cameroon, Ghana, Nigeria, Mali, Burkina Faso, Kenya, Malawi, Tanzania, Uganda, Mozambique, Zambia and host country South Africa.

In his opening and welcome speech to the regulators, Mr Samuel Timpo from African Biosafety Network of Expertise (ABNE) stated that in the efforts to harmonize national biosafety regulations across Africa, the links between national regulatory authorities and key stakeholders must be strengthened.

Biosafety laws were critical for every functional regulatory system but most African countries that signed up to the Cartagena Protocol had not established regulatory systems. The absence of biosafety regulations, limited capacity and limited access to accurate information, have been identified as the critical limitations to the growth of biotechnology said experts at the event.

This visit was able to facilitate the sharing of knowledge and experience amongst regulators from countries with new and emerging biosafety systems and countries such as South Africa that has a developed biosafety system.

The internship and study tour program included workshop sessions which provide an overview of the tan-

Cross-section of delegates at the event

Delegates visit to *Bt* maize demonstration site in Olifantsvlei.

gential and cross cutting issues related to agricultural biotechnology, its applications, biosafety in South Africa, economic development potential for African agriculture and food security as well as several field and laboratory tours. Some of the facilities visited during the tour were: CSIR Bioscience, Department of Science and technology campus, Forestry and Agricultural Biotechnology Institute, ARC Biotechnology Platform, Pioneer DuPont Plant, Small Scale farmer plot etc.

Dr Obokoh, the Chief Executive Officer of AfricaBio in her closing speech said small-scale farmers in Africa contribute significantly to food production in countries and there was the need for serious attention to be turned to assist them, by providing technology enabling biosafety laws. The role of biotechnology in small holder farming in South Africa was also demonstrated to the participating regulators through seeing-is-believing farm visit and interactions with South African small scale farmers.

Mr. Motlatsi Musi -a small scale farmer speaking at the workshop.

BIOTECHNOLOGY IMPORTANT TO AFRICA'S DEVELOPMENT

During a recent AfricaBio media dialogue meeting in Midrand, presentations from researchers at the event covered legislative control of genetically modified (GM) organisms to ensure the safe and responsible handling and use of GM crops in South Africa (specifically GM maize, cotton and soy) and other crosscutting issues impacting on the biotechnology in South Africa and the rest of Africa. Other topics covered at the event included an overview of biotechnology in Africa, a public perception study and the socio-economic impact of GM crops on South Africa. Mr. Marnus Gouse from the University of Pretoria in his presentation highlighted the Socio-economic impact of approved Bt crops in South Africa. The use of *Bacillus thuringiensis (Bt)* cotton he said, had reduced the need to spray insecticides and has led to significant increase in cotton yield in due to the reduced effects of stalk borers.

"Public perceptions shape policy, meaning that science must engage effectively in public relations. Furthermore, governments are often not involved in shaping public perception through information dissemination, which can also lead to negative perceptions if conflated with labor issues or ethical issues - issues that are often not connected to the topics being discussed" says Michael Gastrow in his presentation.

Meanwhile, Soweto smallholder GM maize farmer Motlatsi Musi explained that he had been planting *Bt* maize since 2004, which increased his yields by controlling his stalk borer infestations "We missed the green revolution. Let us not miss the biotechnology revolution," said science publication *Spoonful of Science* editor and pharmacologist Dr Sandy Evans. There was a lack of input and investment into agricultural development in Africa and, hence, stagnating food production growth, she highlighted.

GENETICALLY MODIFIED: FOOD CHEWING LABELS

Mandatory labelling of genetically modified (GM) products is likely to increase costs across the value chain, Dr Stephen Yarrow from CropLife Canada said at a recent business brunch meeting hosted by AfricaBio in Pretoria. He commented that such labelling confuses consumers and give rise to expensive compliance and enforcement regulation.

Dr Stephen Yarrow in his presentation told AfricaBio stakeholders that though consumers have the right information on modern agricultural practices readily available, making labelling redundant. He cited a 2007 Quebee study that shows labelling would cost $161.8 million Canadian dollars and $28m/year for systems management.

Government would also need to pay for regulatory programmes and the maintenance of the labelling system. According to Yarrow: "Canadians are confident they have access to safe, abundant and affordable food. GM crops save [them] 58% on their grocery bills and have been tested and reviewed by developers, regulators and international expert bodies, with no significant safety concerns identified after 15 years of cultivation." Ottowa has adopted voluntary labelling based on the virtual absence of such concerns. He says Canada recognises GM labelling is complicated by a lack of consensus on what GM means. And there is no significant support for the mandatory labelling.

The SA regulations state foodstuffs containing more than 5% of GM organisms should be labelled "contains genetically modified organisms", whether or not they originate from South Africa. Janusz Luterek, a legal authority on the SA labelling legislation, told the meeting those opposed to GM foods interpret the consumer protection Act differently from GM supporters. He says opponents are using the labelling legislation and its cost to prevent the adoption and use of GM food. "They believe any foodstuff containing ingredients sourced from GM organisms needs to be labelled Luterek says. It appears legal tussles might involve the interpretation of terms used in the regulations. But Mariam Mayet of anti-GM lobby group the African Centre for Biosafety says "the law is clear. We favour an interpretation of the consumer protection Act regulations that emphasises the consumers' right to know, which is what they are intended to protect," Mayet says.

Biotechnology stakeholders are concerned with the way the law has been "flouted" since being passed last October and have called on Trade and Industry Minister Rob Davies to clear up the situation and give direction.

Some recommendations that came out of the event includes:

- following closely the outcome of the Task team, set up by the Consumer Commission Commissioner to produce guidelines for the implementation of the provisions of the Act and its regulations
- increasing outreach on the issues and other biosafety matters in South Africa and extended it to the rest of Africa; more outreach to policy makers on the issues
- be ready to pursue a legal recourse if all options fails.

Adapted from article by Shannon Sherry, Financial Mail - 22 June 2012, P.27

From Left Adv. Janusz Luterek, Dr Nompumelelo Obokoh and Dr Stephen Yarrow.

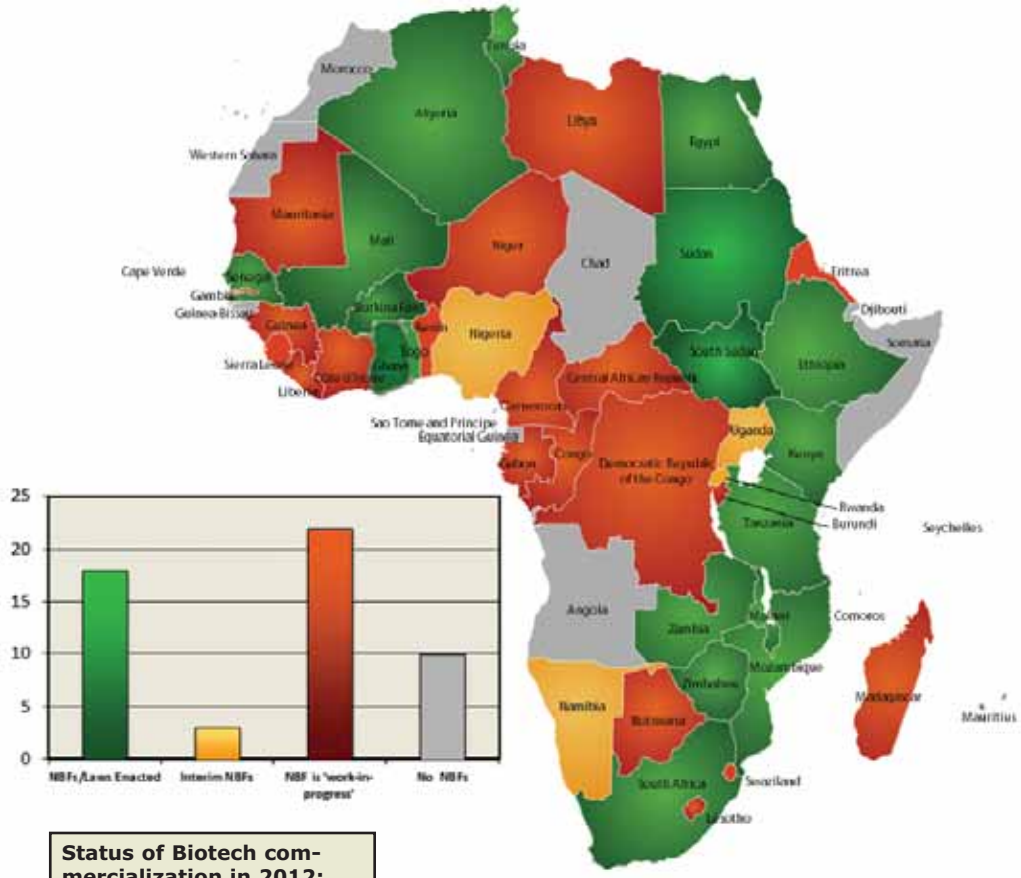
2012 BIO International Convention

The 2012 BIO International Convention, the global event for biotechnology, which took place at the Boston Convention & Exhibition Center in Boston, hosting a recorded high of 25,291 partnering meetings and highlighting a broad array of top-level speakers addressing critical global challenges and the top issues in biotechnology. Hosted by the Biotechnology Industry Organization (BIO), the event drew 16,505 industry leaders from 49 states and 65 countries.

AfricaBio and its stakeholders were represented at the event by Dr Obokoh, the CEO of AfricaBio, who gave presentations and remarks at the event. The first was on Perspectives on Public-Private Partnerships for ag-biotech development in SSA, where she gave an overview of current PPP projects underway in Sub Saharan Africa and the advances that are been made in Africa through the partnerships.

In her remarks at the Global Food and Agriculture Reception, she highlighted the plight of farmers in Africa in their quest to produce more on less land and less resources in the face of the alarming increase in population.

She concluded her remarks by emphasizing that AfricaBio's best years lies ahead and that AfricaBio will be an outstanding and credible voice in South Africa as well as the rest of Africa, advocating for policies that promote innovations in biotechnology, and contributing towards a knowledge-based and innovation driven African economies. Africa missed the green revolution, it would be unfortunate and unfair for us not to take advantage of the new gene revolution, we just cannot sit, see our people suffering and children dying of hunger when there are technologies out there which if used responsibly can in combination with other conventional methods, help take us out of this vicious cycle of poverty.

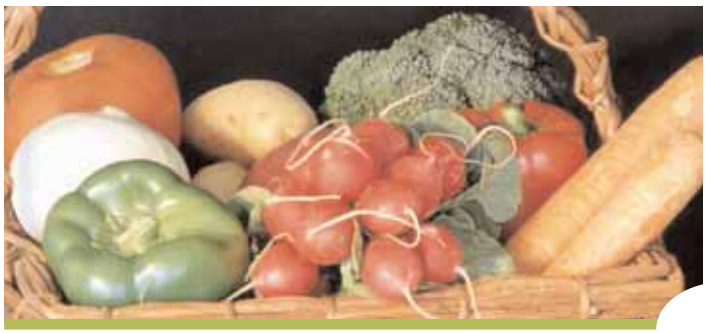


Status of Biotech commercialization in 2012:
South Africa (Maize, cotton, soya)
Egypt (Maize)
Burkina Faso (Cotton)

Confined field trials
Kenya
Nigeria
Uganda

Status of biosafety in Africa

Source: ABNE 2012



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