

THOUGHTLESS ACTIVISTS CONTINUE TO MISINFORM AND MISLEAD THE PUBLIC

The latest development in the ongoing campaign of misdirection by the anti-GM lobby is Biowatch's successful application to the High Court decision to grant them an order that will give them access to all information pertaining to imports, exports, trials and general release of GMOs of all approvals granted to date. This opens the door for well-known anti-GM organisations such as Biowatch, to poke holes in all assessments or reviews previously conducted by experts in the field. "As we know, their aim is not to contribute to the objective and scientific evaluation of GM technology but to sow apprehension and maintain mass negative publicity in order to sway public opinion" says Prof Webster. "This development has serious implications not only for biotechnology but for continuing research and development in South Africa", Prof. Webster added.

This latest development follows hard on the heels of articles in the Herald and Cape Times of 31 January 2005 in which it was reported that the Government had turned down an application by Dow Agrowsciences to test its GM (genetically modified) maize in South Africa. It was reported that Miriam Mayet, director of the Centre for Biosafety, had claimed that one of the reasons the Government had turned down Dow's application was the "potential impact of the pest resistant maize on non-target organisms". This has been refuted by AfricaBio as an outrageous travesty of the truth.

AfricaBio has learnt that Dow's application was not 'turned down' as a result of objections lodged by the Centre for Biosafety, as implied by the published articles. "The application was simply referred back to Dow due to a procedural error in their application. They have been advised to resubmit their application for field trials," says Professor Jocelyn Webster, executive director for AfricaBio, in a statement released in Pretoria.

Furthermore, it was mentioned that the anti-GM lobby group, African Centre for Biosafety, which objected to Dow's application, said it was 'outrageous' that a foreign company had tried to use SA as a "guinea pig" to test its products for release in Europe. The truth of the matter is that Dow was seeking approval from the South Africa regulatory authorities to grow the GM maize in small, isolated test plots to evaluate its effect against two economically important South African pests of maize, the African stem borer and the grain sorghum stem borer. These pests are not found in Europe, so how could the field trials could have been used to influence European regulators?

Prof Webster pointed out the GM maize in Dow's application, is similar to those GM maize varieties already approved for commercial cultivation in South Africa. These approved varieties were tested in South Africa some ten years ago. They have been commercially grown locally, and consumed by man and beast, for the past six years without any reported adverse effect. No incidence of "super-weeds or the persistence of toxins in the environment", as claimed by Mayet, has been seen or reported anywhere in the world.

Similar GM maize have been approved and commercially grown in the USA for the past ten years. Countries including Spain, Germany, Argentina, Honduras, Uruguay, Canada and the Philippines are all growing Bt maize without any adverse effects on human or animal health or contamination of the environment. By the end of 2004, the European Commission had approved the growing of 17 maize hybrids for production of a similar Bt maize in all 25 EU member states.

Despite the worldwide anti-GM campaign conducted by activists, GM crops globally have grown by an average 10% per year over the past ten years. According to the latest global statistics (2004), 81 million ha (67.7 million ha in 2003) were planted to GM crops by 8,5 million farmers (7 million 2003) in 17 countries on all six continents. Notably 90% were resource-poor farmers in developing countries. South Africa planted more than 500 000 ha of transgenic crops. This season it is expected to increase to over 600 000 ha.

The moves made by Mayet, the African Centre for Biosafety and Biowatch appear to be part of a well-orchestrated campaign financed to the tune of some \$70 million a year by foundations, organic food interests, EU governments, and even UN agencies and programmes. It employs moratoriums and threats against agricultural imports from countries that grow biotech crops, complex and expensive requirements for labeling all GM ingredients and tracking them from seed to store shelf, even outright lies about the safety of biotechnology.

“Freedom from hunger is a fundamental human right and to turn it into reality, we must do more to help impoverished nations generate the health and prosperity using all appropriate technologies” said Prof Webster. “A vital step in this process is ending the fear-mongering and regulatory overkill that places precaution against well defined risks. In this fight it is incumbent on media editors to check the validity and veracity of the articles put out by NGOs whose only aim is to condemn Africa to yet another century of minimal economic development, poverty and starvation” she said.
