CROP BIOTECH UPDATE

A weekly summary of world developments in agri-biotech for developing countries, produced by the Global Knowledge Center on Crop Biotechnology, International Service for the Acquisition of Agri-biotech Applications SEAsiaCenter (ISAAA), and AgBiotechNet

---

August 27, 2004

In This Issue:

* Thailand Allows GM Crops to Co-exist with Conventional Varieties
* Malaysia PM Bats for Agric Revolution
* Swiss Cabinet Says No to GM Crop Moratorium Initiative
* Biotech Gains Momentum in Africa
* Theron: Enrourage Not Stop GM Potato Research in Africa
* Issues Hindering Growth of Agri-biotech
* Natural Biodiversity can Enrich Genetic Base of Crops
* Document Reminder:
  - ISAAA Videos Now in VCD Format
  - Brochures on Bt Corn Studies in the Philippines
* Announcement: Book on GMF

THAILAND ALLOWS GM CROPS TO CO-EXIST WITH CONVENTIONAL VARIETIES

Thailand has agreed to allow the co-existence of genetically modified (GM) crops with conventional varieties. “This will allow farmers to choose which crop to plant,” said Dr. Darunee Edwards, scientist at the National Centre of Genetic Engineering and Biotechnology (BIOTEC) in Bangkok.

Edwards added that food/feed safety and biosafety assessment will need to be in place and re-evaluated by Thai technical experts. The Ministry of Natural Resources will take the lead in formulating a law governing these pronouncements.

Thailand’s Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra had earlier announced that the country would lift the three-year ban on GM crop plantings. This will allow GM field trials to commence. Thailand’s national daily The Nation quoted the Prime Minister as saying that “the government won’t let the country miss the biotechnology train.”

For more information, contact D. Edwards at dedwards@biotec.or.th.

In related news, the Committee on Biotechnology Policy led by PM Thaksin Shinawatra agreed to set up a Bio Park to increase Thailand’s capability to boost productivity of biotechnology business.

The Thai Chamber of Commerce (TCC) suggested that the private sector should use biotechnology as a means to increase their productivity. Mr. Pornsilp

Patcharintanakul, Vice Secretary of TCC, revealed that the private sector should: import new technology to standardize the Thai industry; develop consultative business; and to improve agricultural business by using biotechnology.

MALAYSIA PM BATS FOR AGRIC REVOLUTION

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi of Malaysia wants to bring about a revolution in agriculture – a revolution that would being about tangible benefits to Malaysia's farmers as well as make Malaysia a center for agro-based industries and biotechnology.

Wong Sulong of Malaysia's The Star reported that Abdullah has set the target for Malaysia to become a net exporter of food productions by 2010. To make this possible, Malaysia would have to involve the growth of agro-based industries and the development of a biotechnology industry.

SWISS CABINET SAYS NO TO GM CROP MORATORIUM INITIATIVE

The Swiss government is against a proposal calling for a five-year moratorium on genetically modified (GM) crops in the country. It said the move would damage "Switzerland's standing in the field of agricultural research as well as its trade relations with other countries".

The initiative to ban GM crops for food and feed was forwarded by a coalition of environmental groups, consumers and farmers. The group was able to raise more than 120,000 signatures in favor of the initiative since the time that Parliament voted to reject a moratorium on GM crops.

The cabinet said that a law that took effect in January 2004 had already set out a procedure authorizing the import and distribution of GM organisms. It added that the legislation was precautionary and aimed at protecting non-GM agriculture.

See the full article online at
http://www.swissinfo.org/sen/swissinfo.html?siteSect=511&sid=5153637

BIOTECH GAINS MOMENTUM IN AFRICA

The acceptance of biotechnology is gaining momentum in Africa as more and more countries realize the potential it offers for sustainable food production as another tool to help eradicate famine and poverty. This was stressed by Prof. Jocelyn Webster, executive director of AfricaBio, during a Southern Africa Biotechnology Communications Training Workshop in Pretoria, South Africa. She said that by the end of 2005 most countries in Africa would have draft biosafety frameworks in place.

The workshop was organized by AfricaBio to train delegates on communicating biotechnology to the public of Southern African countries. More than 70 delegates from 10 of the 14 Southern African Development Community countries, including representatives from Kenya, Cote D'Ivoire, Tanzania and the United States attended.

Several delegates indicated that they are requesting their governments to put the necessary legal frameworks in place. They also asked the South African authorities to assist with these procedures.

A consumer survey conducted under the auspices of the University of Pretoria in January 2004 indicated that 58% of consumers in Gauteng and 56% in Cape Town considered GM food to be as safe as conventional foods. The survey also found that respondents had confidence in government regulatory control measures.

For more information, contact AfricaBio at africabio@mweb.co.za

THERON: ENCOURAGE NOT STOP GM POTATO RESEARCH IN AFRICA

Potatoes South Africa, the representative organization of South Africa's potato producers, supports the use of modern biotechnology to improve the production of potatoes in South Africa provided it is done in a safe, responsible and ethical manner. Dr. DJ Theron, chief executive officer, Potatoes South Africa, Pretoria, made this clarification in the light of some groups to "derail the efforts by the Agricultural Research Council and Michigan State University to develop a potato variety that is resistant to tuber moth, a major pest of potatoes in South Africa".

Theron noted that the development of a GM potato should be allowed to proceed, subject to objective and scientific evaluation as provided for by current legislation rather than be thwarted by speculation and misleading information. He said that both farmers and consumers will benefit from the technology by reducing production costs, particularly pesticide application, thus resulting in less environmental pollution and lower pesticide residues.

Theron said that Potatoes South Africa will not support the production or sale of any genetically modified potato unless it has passed all official and legal requirements for general release. He added that no GM potatoes are grown commercially or marketed in the country at present.

For more of Theron's views, see
http://www.pretorianews.co.za/index.php?fSectionId=667&fArticleId=2199185

ISSUES HINDERING GROWTH OF AGRI-BIOTECH

The growth of agricultural biotechnology is being hampered by three major issues: trade, biosafety regulations, and the food industry. So says Channapatna Prakash, professor in plant molecular genetics and the director of the Center for Plant Biotechnology Research at Tuskegee University, Alabama, USA in an interview in the business magazine BioSpectrum.

Prakash noted that some countries perceive that bringing in biotechnology would jeopardize their trade. He gave the example of Namibia, one of the biggest importers of corn, which cut off all its corn trade with South Africa because the latter grows GM corn. China was also cited for not approving Bt cotton despite being field tested for several years now. In both cases, trade more than any other concern continues to be the guiding factor in growing GM crops.

Current regulations are “very burdensome, costly, and mostly unscientific,” Prakash added. He said that the private sector has several GM crops that are ready for the market but are hindered by the high cost of regulations. The food industry was likewise cited as a problem with company monopoly dictating the nonuse of GM potato despite being comparable to conventional potato and using less pesticide.

Visit BioSpectrum online at http://www.biospectrumindia.com.

NATURAL BIODIVERSITY CAN ENRICH GENETIC BASE OF CROPS

Natural biodiversity can enrich the genetic base of cultivated plants with novel alleles that improve productivity and adaptation. This was highlighted in a study of Ait Gur and Dani Zamir of the Robert Smith Institute of Plant Sciences and Genetics in Agriculture of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Israel.

Gur and Zamir evaluated the progress in breeding for increased tomato (Solanum lycopersicum) yield using genotypes carrying a pyramid of three independent yield-promoting genomic regions introduced from the drought-tolerant green-fruited wild species Solanum pennellii. Yield of hybrids parented by the pyramided genotypes was more than 50% higher than that of a control market leader variety under both wet and dry field conditions that received 10% of the irrigation water.

The study, according to the authors, demonstrated the breaking of agricultural yield barriers that provides the rationale for implementing similar strategies for other agricultural organisms that are important for global food security.

For the article published in the August 24 issue of PLoS Biology, visit http://plosbiology.org/plosonline/?request=getdocument&doi=10.1371/journal.pbio.0020245

DOCUMENT REMINDER

ISAAA VIDEOS NOW IN VCD FORMAT

The International Service for the Acquisition of Agri-biotech Applications has just released a VCD version of two videos on the Bt corn story in the Philippines. Due to requests from those who do not have DVD players, the VCD version will enable any multi-media system to play the videos. The first 18-minute video traces the seven year process that brought to fruition Bt corn in farmers’ fields. The second 5.4 minute video features testimonies of farmers from a small village in Mindanao who planted Bt corn for the first time. The

DVD version which has a higher resolution than the VCD is still available for purchase. Orders can be made by emailing m.navarro@isaaa.org.

BROCHURES ON BT CORN STUDIES IN THE PHILIPPINES

The SEARCA Biotechnology Information Center (BIC) in the Philippines recently published two brochures that highlight the results of studies conducted on Bt corn in the Philippines. "Philippines Bt corn and feed safety," by Prof. Lydia J. Querubin, university researcher, Institute of Animal Science, University of the Philippines Los Banos (UPLB) investigated the feed safety and feeding value of Bt corn to broilers and its effects on meat quality. Results showed that growth performance and meat quality of broilers fed with Bt corn and non-Bt corn diets are comparable suggesting the safety of Bt corn as feeds. Download the brochure at http://www.searca.org/~bic/info_kits/btcorn_feed.pdf.

"Philippines Bt corn and insect diversity" presents the results of insect diversity studies on Bt corn fields conducted in Villaluna, Cauayan, Isabela, and Panagan, Tigaon, Camarines Sur. Using the Shannon Index to measure species diversity, Dr. Stephen G. Reyes, assistant professor, Department of Entomology, UPLB, showed that in Bt- and non Bt-corn fields, insect diversity was generally the same. He and co-workers found more beneficial insects in Bt corn fields than in non-Bt corn fields sprayed with chemical insecticides. Download the brochure at http://www.searca.org/ic/info_kits/btcorn_insectdiv.pdf

ANNOUNCEMENT: BOOK ON GMF

“The Frankenfood Myth: How Protest and Politics Threaten the Biotech Revolution” by Henry Miller and Gregory Conko has just been released. The authors trace the origins of gene-splicing, its applications, and the backlash from consumer groups and government agencies against so called “Frankenfoods”. They also discuss the peril of allowing the precautionary principle to drive risk analysis and policymaking. The foreword is written by Dr. Norman Borlaug.

To stop receiving this newsletter, please send an e-mail message to knowledge.center@isaaa.org and write, "unsubscribe newsletter" in the subject box.

Do not hesitate to tell other colleagues/contacts about this mail list. If they wish to join, they should send an e-mail message to knowledge.center@isaaa.org leaving the subject blank and entering the one-line text message as follows: SUBSCRIBE Crop Biotech Network

Please visit CropBiotech Net web pages (www.isaaa.org/kc) to view previous issues of this newsletter and see other available resources for download.