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

---

July 9, 2004

In This Issue:

* New EC Regulations Hamper Biotech Companies
* GE Amendments Hamper Research in Germany
* Cartagena Protocol and Agri-biotech
* Kenyan Scientists Root for Science and Technology Park
* New £25M Crop Research Center
* Plant Enzyme Function Changes with Cell Location
* Announcement: French Documents on Bt Maize

NEW EC REGULATIONS HAMPER BIOTECH COMPANIES

The European Commission's (EC) implementation of the Technology Transfer Block Exemption Regulations (TTBER) is a "poor-fit for biotech companies which are dependent on licensing for income and to access technologies." So says, Sabine Louet in the journal Nature Biotechnology.

Louet in an article entitled "New EU antitrust law burdens licensing" said the regulations define rules by which companies can be exempted from proving that a licensing agreement does not hinder competition or are in line with antitrust laws. If legally challenged by not meeting the exemption criteria, companies need to convince the EC through a costly and time-consuming proposition.

EuropaBio, the European biotech industry association, opined that in using a market share threshold to determine whether block exemption is applicable is not compatible with the biotech sector that heavily relies on licensing. "[The new TTBER] are not good for [promoting technological] breakthroughs," said Valentine Korah, professor of competition law at University College London. She believes there is a risk that "parties will chose to do their R&D in the United States, Canada or Australia because antitrust laws in those countries are not as restrictive."

For the full article, visit http://www.nature.com/cgi-taf/DynaPage.taf?file=/nbt/journal/v22/n6/full/nbt0604-643.html.

GE AMENDMENTS HAMPER RESEARCH IN GERMANY

The Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG, German Research Foundation) said that the draft amendment prepared by the German federal government on the Genetic Engineering Act restricts innovation and research in Germany.

In a statement, the DFG noted that it opposes three aspects of the draft amendment. One is that the draft assumes that a particular risk is automatically attached to the introduction of genetically modified organisms (GMOs). Second, is that the amendment intends to hold users of GMOs responsible for "intrusion" by GMOs into conventionally or ecologically produced seeds. Thirdly, the DFG does not agree with the planned separation of the Central Commission for Biological Safety into two committees and the inclusion of members without technical expertise.

The DFG also frowned on the suggested establishment of a federal register for recording the location of GMOs, as well as the long lead time prior to sowing GMOs.

For further information contact: Prof. Jörg Hacker, Department of Molecular Infection Biology, University of Würzburg at j.hacker@mail.uni-wuerzburg.de. The statement in German is available at http://www.dfg.de/aktuelles_presse/reden_stellungnahmen/2004/download/gentechnikrecht_0604.pdf.

CARTAGENA PROTOCOL AND AGRI-BIOTECH

"The biotech community needs an international agreement to harmonize regulatory supervision of biotech. It is not an option to wish the Cartagena Protocol to fade away; we would have to negotiate another agreement on the same subject if it were not there," says Willy De Greef of The Plant Biotechnology Institute for Developing Countries (IPBO), Department of Molecular Genetics, Ghent University, Belgium.

In his article entitled "The Cartagena Protocol and the future of agri-biotech," De Greef observed that the regulation of biotechnology, via the Cartagena Protocol, poses a threat to the efforts of public research institutions to create sustainable solutions for food security and health problems in developing countries. At present, the way that the protocol is being implemented, according to the author, limits the capability of practitioners and scientists to use biotechnology to improve the quality of life for the poor in developing countries.

To improve the situation, the author suggests that a platform for public sector research be created to provide a venue for the concerns and needs of the scientific community in the implementation of the Cartagena Protocol. Likewise, he also suggested that scientists should be represented at the Protocol meetings; the positions for the public goods research sector be defended; and information on the impact of regulatory options currently being debated be provided.

For more information, email Willy De Greef at willy.degreef@ibrs.be. His commentary was also featured at Nature and can be downloaded at

http://www.nature.com/cgi-taf/DynaPage.taf?file=/nbt/journal/v22/n7/full/nbt0704-811.html&filetype=pdf

KENYAN SCIENTISTS ROOT FOR SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY PARK

The government of Kenya has been asked to support the establishment of Science and Technology Parks if the country is to realize its stated dream of industrializing by the year 2020. The request was made in Nairobi by about 100 participants in this year's Scientific Revival Day in Africa (SRDA) workshop, which was jointly organized by the International Service for the Acquisition of Agri-biotech Applications AfriCenter (ISAAA AfriCenter), the African Academy of Sciences (AAS), The Kenya National Academy of Sciences (KNAS), and the African Technology Policy Studies Network (ATPS).

June 30 was declared Africa's science and technology (S&T) day way back in 1987 by the Organization of African Unity (OAU), now renamed African Union (AU). The meeting revealed that most African countries, including Kenya, lacked science and technology policies to guide developments in the sector. They called on the governments to institute such policies to clear the way for growth in S&T. They were categorical that the continent would not industrialize if S&T continued to occupy obscure positions in the priority list of the powers that be. They also discussed the critical roles S&T Parks continue to play in the success of Western and South East Asian economies.

The participants, likewise, identified biotechnology, health, telecommunication, information technology, and textile as key areas that could immediately benefit from such engines of growth if they were to be established locally. Despite the significance of S&T Parks in development, only five African countries (Morocco, South Africa, Egypt, Senegal and Madagascar) have them. This compares very poorly with China who has 83, Britain 63, and France 60. Ten top Kenya scientists and industrialists were mandated to seek audience with the government regarding the establishment of the parks./Kenya Biotechnology Information Center

NEW £25M CROP RESEARCH CENTER

The Scottish Agricultural Science Agency (SASA) is soon to start work on its new £25 million research center that is envisioned to be the venue from where future GM crop trials in Scotland will be monitored. Scientists at the Edinburgh-based research institute are engaged in researches involving pesticides to the development of new types of crops.
From its new location at Gogarbank Farm, SASA scientists will also look at the genetics of plant breeding, how new crop varieties fit in with existing farming systems, and their environmental impact.

The research activities at SASA is said to form the backbone of the Scottish Executive agency's specialist research work. The institute's duties also include carrying out checks on GM trials, preserving and maintaining a wide range of historic, heritage and other varieties of potatoes, cereals and peas, and monitoring the pesticide load in diets and the pattern of pesticides use.

Read the news article from the Scotsman at http://news.scotsman.com/edinburgh.cfm?id=761942004.

PLANT ENZYME FUNCTION CHANGES WITH CELL LOCATION

The location of a plant enzyme within the cell can change its functions instantaneously. This was the finding of scientists at the U.S. Department of Energy's Brookhaven National Laboratory who noted that it was the first example of location-dependent production of alternate products by single enzymes. Researcher John Shanklin said that multifunctional enzymes could substantially expand the diversity of metabolic products available to a cell, thus increasing the organism's ability to adapt to changing conditions. The finding also provide new ways to tailor plant products to meet specific needs, such as growing crop plants that make different and perhaps healthier oils.
The full paper is published in the July 13, 2004 issue of the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences. See a popular article on this research at http://www.bnl.gov/bnlweb/newsindex.html.

ANNOUNCEMENT: FRENCH DOCUMENTS ON BT MAIZE

The French versions of different publications on the potential benefits of Bt maize are now available at http://www.isaaa.org/kc. These new documents discusses the positive effects of Bt maize in decreasing mycotoxin levels; the estimated increase (43Mha) of the global area for Bt maize; and the predicted global demand for maize by 2020.

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.