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

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BIOSAFETY PROTOCOL NOW OPERATIONAL

The 87 member states of the Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety have adopted documentation requirements and other procedures for promoting the safety of international trade in living or genetically modified organisms (LMOS/GMOs). This was agreed in a meeting of the Parties to the Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

The Convention on Biological Diversity said that under the new system, all bulk shipments of GM crops intended for food, feed or processing (such as soybeans and corn) are to be identified as “may contain LMOs.” The accompanying documentation should also indicate the contact details of the importer, exporter or other appropriate authority.

Hamdallah Zedah, the Protocol’s Executive Secretary, notes that with an operational system for identifying and labeling GMO exports, “countries can enjoy the benefits of biotechnology with greater confidence while avoiding the potential risks.”

More detailed documentation was also agreed to be required for those GMOs (such as genetically engineered seeds and fish) that are meant to be introduced directly to the environment. These shipments should be clearly identified as "destined for contained use.” The common, scientific and commercial names of the modified organism, the transformation event code or unique identifier code, any handling and storage requirements, contact details in the case of emergency, and how the GMO is to be used, should be specified in the accompanying documents.

The meeting also adopted procedures and mechanisms for promoting compliance with the Protocol and assisting countries in cases of non-compliance. It established a 15-member compliance committee that will submit regular reports and recommendations to the governing body of the Protocol. A negotiating group of legal and technical experts on liability and redress for damages resulting from transboundary movements of GMOs was also launched. Likewise, the Biosafety Clearing House (which enables governments to share information on GMOs, national legislation, and other critical matters) was made fully functional.

View online the Convention on Biological Diversity's news release at http://www.biodiv.org/doc/press/2004/pr-2004-02-27-bs-en.pdf. For more information, contact Michael Williams at michael.williams@unep.ch.

A CALL FOR ADOPTION OF NEW TECHNOLOGIES IN AFRICA

Key African stakeholders who attended a recent technology policy workshop in Nairobi, Kenya called for the increased use of new technologies to improve agricultural productivity in Africa. Speaking during the African Technology Policy Studies network (ATPS) workshop, Prof. Norah Olembo, chairperson, Biotechnology Trust Africa (BTA) urged African leaders to develop concrete plans to enable the continent to import, domesticate and use new technologies for faster economic development.

During the workshop, key policy makers, researchers, scientists, industrialists, donors, journalists and other stakeholders reviewed Kenya's Economic Recovery Strategy Paper. The participants were unanimous that Africa could not develop without constructive engagement of scientists, researchers, industrialists and governments. Some of the issues that emerged from the discussion were:

* Scientists and policy makers should develop concrete policies to guide the implementation of science and technology innovations. Constructive engagements between scientists, technologists and politicians should also be encouraged.

* Scientists should actively market themselves and their activities while, at the same time, proactively seek solutions to problems. They should also develop technology pacts with industrialists to help them in commercializing their research products.

* To be able to modernize African Agriculture, low-yielding traditional seeds should be phased out but caution should be taken to ensure that this will not have adverse effects on resource-poor farmers, who are largely dependent on these type of seeds.

This technology policy workshop is a follow-up activity of the 2003 Scientific Revival Day in Africa, where it was suggested that the various sectors meet regularly with policy-makers to discuss how they could dialogue with one another on issues fostering the use of science and technology for Kenya's development. /African Technology Policy Studies and Kenya Biotechnology Information Center (http://www.isaaa-africenter.org)

UGANDA APPROVES THE IMPORTATION OF GM CROPS

The Ugandan government recently approved the importation of genetically modified (GM) foods into the country with strict instructions that they will be solely used for consumption, and not for cultivation.

According to the statement issued by the National Agricultural Research Organisation (NARO), the Ugandan government was said to "recognize the controversial nature of this subject (GM importation) and has therefore decided to proceed with caution, building consensus at all stages." The Ugandan government was also described to be concerned that policy decisions should not adversely affect the development of science.

This decision is the first time that the Ugandan government has declared an explicit policy on GM foods. However, acknowledgements have been made that some scientific questions about the potential environmental risks of GM crops still remain in the open.

According to George Otim-Nape, NARO director-general, the position of the Ugandan government is that GM foods can be considered safe for human consumption until proven otherwise. At the same time, he says, given that long-term risks cannot be entirely ruled out, Uganda will continue to "build capacity to understand, assess, evaluate and manage potential risks and benefits of biotechnology."

See the news release at
http://www.scidev.net/News/index.cfm?fuseaction=readNews&itemid=1257&language=1

BIO-VALLEYS FOR TAMIL NADU

The government of Tamil Nadu in India will facilitate the establishment of Biotechnology Enterprise Zones or Bio-Valleys to exploit the bioresources of the State. On the drawing board is the setting up of different types of biotech entities consisting of a research organization, service providers, as well as companies which will commercialize the new products and processes.

According to S. Felix, associate professor of the Fisheries Biotechnology Centre, Fisheries College and Research Institute in Tamil Nadu, four biotech parks and a bioinformatics and genomics centre will be established to form a Biotechnology Enterprise Zone.

This zone will include a biotechnology incubator park to focus on agriculture, medical, environment and industrial biotechnology opportunities; a women’s biotechnology park to focus on microenterprise and traditional biotechnologies; and a medicinal plants biotechnology park.

S. Felix’s article entitled “Biotechnology policy of the government of Tamil Nadu and the scope for development” is in Vol. 6, No. 1, 2003 issue of Asian Biotechnology and Development Review. For more information about this journal, email Sachin Chaturvedi, managing editor, at sachin@ris.org.in.

FAO E-MAIL CONFERENCE ON ROLE OF BIOTECH IN RESEARCH

What should be the role and focus of biotechnology in the agricultural research agendas of developing countries? This was posed in a moderated e-mail conference hosted by the Food and Agriculture Organization Biotechnology Forum. Major points raised during that conference were:

* The agricultural research agenda should be defined using a "bottom-up" approach, based on the needs of local communities in developing countries. The needs and realities of small farmers in developing countries require special attention in the research agenda.

* Research is very important for developing country agriculture and more public funding of biotechnology research is needed.

* Biotechnology research can and should complement research into conventional technologies. Research collaboration, both within and between countries, is essential for developing countries but there are some reservations about public-private sector collaborations.

* Intellectual property rights are an issue of concern for biotechnology research in developing countries.

The summary document of the FAO e-mail conference is now available online at http://www.fao.org/biotech/logs/C8/summary.htm or can be requested from biotech-admin@fao.org.

EMBRAPA: NEW GM WAVE COMING

A new wave of genetically modified (GM) plants is coming and they will be more relevant to consumers. This was emphasized by Embrapa's Alexandre Nepomuceno in a talk at the III Brazilian Soya Congress, which coincides with the VII Worldwide Conference of Soya Research at Iguaçu.

Examples given by Nepomuceno were research aimed at a strawberry with high vitamin C, and soya oil with the same characteristics as olive oil. He also mentioned edible vaccines to protect against infant diarrhea and other illnesses as well as the possibility of plastic production from plants.

Nepomuceno explained that the adoption of the next phase of GM plants will have to happen slowly. He noted that society has to be well informed of what the technology really is and its potential risks.

EMPRAPA or the Brazilian Agricultural Research Corporation provides feasible solutions for the sustainable development of Brazilian agribusiness through knowledge and technology generation and transfer.

More on EMBRAPA at http://www.embrapa.br/english/index.htm.

MONSANTO GETS GM SAFETY CERTIFICATES FROM CHINA

Monsanto has received approval from the Chinese government of final safety certificates for the importation of genetically modified (GM) crops. The safety certificates will allow for a more predictable process for traders and continued trade of Roundup Ready soy beans.

Jerry Hjelle, Monsanto's vice president of regulatory affairs said that Monsanto received safety certificates for import of five commercial products in soy beans, corn, and cotton. It hopes to receive a favorable decision on an additional crop - canola.

Visit the Monsanto website at http://www.monsanto.com.

DUPONT AND SYNGENTA GIVE TO GLOBAL CROP DIVERSITY TRUST

The Global Crop Diversity Trust, an international fund charged with securing long-term funding for the support of genebanks and crop diversity collections around the world, has obtained the commitments of Dupont and Syngenta for its program. The two companies pledged $1 M each.

Formed in 2002 by the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization and the 16 Future Harvest Centers of the Consultative Group on International Agriculture Research, the Trust has been charged with raising a $260 million endowment to maintain the world's most critical germplasm for agricultural and industrial crops as well as support struggling collections especially those in developing countries.

The crop diversity collections, holding millions of plant samples housed in gene banks, provide the raw material necessary for plant breeders to develop reliable, hardier, more productive and nutritious food crops for farmers.

More information on the Trust is available at http://startwithaseed.org. Visit Dupont at http://www/dupont.com and Syngenta at http://www.syngenta.com.

ANNOUNCEMENTS:

EXEC SUMMARY OF ISAAA BRIEFS 30 IN ARABIC AND ITALIAN

The Arabic and Italian versions of the Executive Summary of ISAAA Briefs 30, written by Dr. Clive James, Chair, ISAAA Board of Directors, is now available online at http://www.isaaa.org/kc. This publication is also available in English and in Portugese, while its press release is available in French, German, Hindi, Indonesian, Italian, Japanese, Spanish, Spanish-Argentinian, and Thai. All of these other publications are also downloadable from the same site.

STUDY ON BIOLOGICAL RESOURCES AND TRADITIONAL KNOWLEDGE

A pre-publication version of the study by A.K. Gupta entitled "The Role of Intellectual Property Rights in the Sharing of Benefits Arising from the Use of Biological Resources and Traditional Knowledge," which was commissioned by the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO) and the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) is available online at http://www.wipo.int/edocs/prdocs/en/2004/wipo_pr_2004_373.html. In this publication, three case studies were considered including a 35-page study of the patenting of the gene Xa21 of wild rice from Mali, which confers resistance to bacterial rice blight. The press release of the study is available in English, French and Spanish. Interested parties may also email publicinf@wipo.int for more information.

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