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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THAILAND TO REVIEW GM POLICY

The Thai Cabinet has reversed an earlier decision to allow field trials and commercialization of genetically modified (GM) crops. Instead, an academic committee composed of biotechnology experts has been set up to review the national policy on the planting of GM crops. The creation of this GM committee was announced by Science Minister Korn Dabbaransri.

The committee will consider three alternatives: completely promote genetically modified organisms (GMOs) in Thailand; allow the co-existence of GMOs and non-GMO crops; or to totally ban GMOs in the country.

Agriculture Minister Somsak Thepsuthin. who had earlier announced that Thailand would allow GM crops to co-exist with conventional varieties, said that Thai legislation was lagging behind the developed world and that he would call for a review of current laws.

The Thai Cabinet likewise instructed the Ministry of Natural Resources and the Environment to expedite the passage of legislation concerning biosafety.

EU ADVISORY GROUP ON FOOD CHAIN

The Advisory Group on the Food Chain and Animal and Plant Health has been created to facilitate consultation and dialogue between the European Commission and European organizations on food safety policy. The group will be composed of about 45 members from EU-level associations representing consumers, the food industry, retailers and farmers.

David Byrne, the European Commissioner for Health and Consumer Protection, said "Debate and dialogue with stakeholders helps strengthen the quality of our policy making and is an essential component of good governance. Over the past few years the EU has put in place a world-class system of food safety regulation. It is appropriate that today we also modernize our system for consulting on food safety."

The new Advisory Group replaces five existing consultative bodies - the Advisory Committee on Foodstuffs, plus the standing groups on veterinary matters, plant health, animal welfare and feeding stuffs previously attached to the Advisory Committee on Agricultural Product Health and Safety. The new Advisory Group will focus on strategies on food safety policies.

For further information see
http://europa.eu.int/comm/food/committees/advisory/index_en.htm or visit
http://europa.eu.int/rapid/pressReleasesAction.do?reference=IP/04/1051&format=HTML&aged=0&language=EN

WTO DELAYS DECISION ON EU BIOTECH BAN

The World Trade Organization (WTO), acting on a request by the European Union, ruled that it would seek expert testimony before deciding on the complaint filed last year by the United States, Canada and Argentina over the E.U.'s moratorium on approving genetically modified foods for sale in Europe. That means the panel's report, initially expected before the end of this year, will be delayed until late March, according to WTO documents.

The E.U. ended its six-year moratorium in May when it allowed onto the market a modified strain of sweet corn, grown mainly in the United States. Unease over the use of GM crops is still rife in Europe, however, despite the stringent labeling requirements of the European Union, and rigorous scientific testing of GM foods.

The full story can be found at
http://pewagbiotech.org/newsroom/summaries/display.php3?NewsID=736

INDIA PLANS NEW POLICIES TO SUPPORT BIOTECH PROJECTS

The Indian government is formulating new policies to boost investment and research in the local biotechnology sector. These include promoting the speedy approval of GMO crops, and funding and infrastructure support for public-private partnership programs in the key areas of crops, biofertilizers, medicinal and

aromatic plants, animal and plant biotechnology, aquaculture, and marine biotechnology.

The issue of biosafety will also be taken into consideration, and although the government seeks active collaboration with foreign entities for its biotechnology projects, it would welcome such entities only if biosafety standards will be complied with. "Biotechnology and bio-safety must go hand in hand," Kapil Sibal, Science and Technology Minister, said in an interview.

The new policies should be in place within eight to nine months, and seek to emphasize the use of biotechnology to increase food production, as well as to organize research and development projects to improve forest trees, horticulture, and plantation crops through the use of molecular biology tools.

The full story is available at Financial Express online at http://www.financialexpress.com/latest_full_story.php?content_id=67557

INDIA SETS UP LOCAL BIOTECH PARK

A 600 sq km area in Genome Valley, Hyderabad, India will soon be home to the Shapoorji Pallonji (SP) Biotech Park Pvt Ltd., an “incubation center” set up in association with the Indian Institute of Chemical Technology (IICT), Centre for Cellular and Molecular Biology (CCMB), and in cooperation with a few US-based research institutes, including the International Association of Science Parks, Biotech Industrial Organization, and Research Triangle Park.

The region of Hyderabad has a large number of research laboratories, corporate hospitals, and centers of excellence in biotechnology. With the biotechnology park, research and development may instantly go hand-in-hand, through the introduction of a network of pilot plants and business enterprise zones. As a step towards this, the SP Biotech Park is now working with the Imperial College of London to boost entrepreneurship skills among budding scientists.

About 70 per cent of bookings have already been completed, with 13 companies expressing interest for the first phase of the project, covering an area of 140 acres in the Genome Valley. The second phase, which starts by October, involves a 25-acre area already booked by Hyderabad-based biotech firm, Biological E Ltd.

The full story is available at Financial Express online at http://www.financialexpress.com/fe_full_story.php?content_id=67475. Details on the park can also be found at its website, http://www.spbiotechpark.com

TAIWAN TO SET-UP BIOTECH COMMITTEE

Premier Yu Shyi-kun of Taiwan pledged his commitment to establish a Biotech Industry Strategy Consulting Committee, which would consolidate and integrate the country's biotech-based promotion organizations and research institutes. This was after the recently concluded annual Strategic Review Board (SRB) meetings, organized by the Cabinet-level Science & Technology Advisory Group (STAG) to formulate technology strategies and policy.

Meeting delegates noted that Taiwan was falling behind its regional competitors in the area of biotechnology, and recommended that an independent body was needed to steer the future direction of life sciences in Taiwan. Premier Yu gave his support to the concept, and pledged that if a suitable leader could not be quickly found to head the committee, he would take on the job himself. Other recommendations included calls to increase government investment, improve the efficiency of the drug approval process, improve the training of personnel for the industry, and recruit more talented professionals from overseas.

The full story is available at http://www.biotecheast.com/twbiotechnews_30Aug04.html.

MONSANTO TO COMMERCIALIZE LOW-LINOLENIC ACID SOYBEAN

A new low-linolenic acid soybean that will reduce or eliminate trans fatty acids (trans fats) in processed soybean oil, while maintaining performance parity with leading soybean varieties, has been developed and is now ready for commercialization. The Monsanto variety carrying the VISTIVE brand will be available for the 2005 crop season.

Produced through conventional breeding, the soybean variety will be grown by contract growers who, in participation with soybean processors, will crush the grain, refine the oil, and market that oil to food companies. The low-linolenic oil offers direct consumer benefits, specifically enhanced food-grade oils. For more details on the new soybean, visit http://www.monsanto.com/monsanto/layout/media/04/09-01-04.asp

WILD CROP SPECIES BOOST GENETIC DIVERSITY

Researchers in China crossed synthetic wheats from the International Maize and Wheat Improvement Center (CIMMYT) in Mexico with local wheats, producing a hybrid now benefiting Chinese farmers. Breeders in Sichuan province have been using the CIMMYT-developed synthetic hexaploid wheat to improve quality, yield potential, and disease resistance. CIMMYT said that after Chinese scientists crossed and backcrossed this wheat with high-yielding local varieties, several lines were developed, and they are currently testing five more.

The synthetic wheats pass on beneficial traits such as large kernels, heavy spikes, and resistance to new races of Chinese stripe rust. During two years of yield trials, the two varieties derived from synthetic wheats had 20% to 35% higher yields than the commercial check variety. One of these varieties, Chuanmai42, had the highest average yields at more than six tons per hectare in the trials. It is now recommended by the government to farmers.

For more information visit http://www.cimmyt.org/english/wps/news/wild_wht.htm.

In related developments, the International Institute of Tropic Agriculture (IITA) based in Nigeria, Africa has acknowledged the work of Dr. Nagib Nassaar of the Universidade de Brasilia for his work in the genetic enhancement of

cassava with wild Manihot species which has benefited many organizations doing cassava breeding, including IITA.

In a letter to Nassar, Rodomiro Ortiz, direction research for development of IITA, noted that Nassar provided “cassava germplasm for identification of excellent breeding lines at IITA” and that his breeding approaches showed “the benefits of preserving biodiversity through the use of Manihot genetic resources for enhancing cassava germplasm aimed at higher yields and improved nutrient quality.”

Email Nagib Nassar at nagnassa@rudah.com.br.

DOCUMENT REMINDER

Annotated Bibliographies for Environmental/Ecological Impacts of Transgenic Organisms
Compiled by Dr. LaReesa Wolfenbarger, ISB
Last updated September, 2003 and quarterly thereafter

To increase awareness and accessibility of peer-reviewed journal articles with data addressing environmental and ecological impacts of transgenic organisms,Information Systemsfor Biotechnology (http://www.isb.vt.edu/)has compiled an annotated bibliography with abstracts for environmental/ecological impacts of transgenic organisms. The PDFs are also available fordownload on the ISAAA website at http://www.isaaa.org/kc/bin/publications/docabinets/index.htm

Annotated Bibliography on Environmental and Ecological Impacts from Transgenic Plants I: Transgene Persistence and Gene Flow (PDF)
Annotated Bibliography on Environmental and Ecological Impacts from Transgenic Plants II: Unintended Effects (PDF)
Annotated Bibliography on Environmental and Ecological Impacts from Transgenic Plants III: Insect Resistant Plants (PDF)
Annotated Bibliography on Environmental and Ecological Impacts of Transgenic Animals (PDF)
Annotated Bibliography on Environmental and Ecological Impacts of Transgenic Microorganisms (PDF)

ERS DATABASE ON BIOTECH IP

The Economic Research Service of the US Department of Agriculture has released adatabase that identifies and describes U.S. utility patents on inventions in biotechnology and other biological processes-with issue dates between 1976 and 2000-that are used in food and agriculture. The database also provides information about the ownership of these patents, whether patents are held in the public or private sector, and changes in patent ownership due to firm mergers, acquisitions, and spin-offs.

The database includes: agricultural biotechnology utility patents; patent ownership information; and a system of technology classification.
Visit the database at http://www.ers.usda.gov/Data/AgBiotechIP/.

ANNOUNCEMENT: CONFERENCE ON MORAL IMPERATIVE OF BIOTECH

The Pontifical Academy of Sciences, in cooperation with the US Embassy to the Holy See, has organized a conference on the Moral Imperative of Biotechnology, to be held on the 24th of September, 2004, at the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome, Italy. Active in promoting solidarity and justice between the industrialized and developing world, the academy seeks to unite the public and private sectors in exploring the potential of genetically modified organisms to address hunger and malnutrition.

Sessions will examine: the current state of the global food crisis; the theological and moral case for biotech food; scientific advances in biotech crops; how developing world farmers have used biotech crops; and debunking the myths of biotechnology.

More information on the Academy and its activities can be found at http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_academies/acdscien/

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