

## **South African GM Grapevine field trials to go ahead**

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South African authorities have given the go-ahead for open-air field trials of grapevines genetically modified (GM) to resist fungal disease, despite the failure of fungal resistant grapevines in German trials several years ago. The Institute for Wine Biotechnology (IWB) based at the University of Stellenbosch lodged their application to conduct open-air field trials of GM Sultana and Chardonnay grapevine varieties in 2006.

The African Centre for Biosafety (ACB) interrogated the safety data submitted by the IWB in 2006 and submitted an objection the grounds that the risk of contamination of adjacent fields was very high, posing a risk to South Africa's lucrative export market. "The European Union is South Africa's major trade partner in the wine industry, where consumers have very low tolerance for genetically modified products. Contamination is a real threat as seed can be transported by birds or rain and could put our export market at risk for a technology that has already proven ineffective." said ACB's Haidee Swanby.

"Although the proponents argue that the GM grapevine reduces the need for pesticides in the vineyard, they are simply replacing one form of pesticide with another. GM crops have consistently developed resistance to targeted pests requiring the use of additional and often more toxic chemicals, threatening health and farmer incomes ", said Vanessa Black of Earthlife Africa..

The vibrant South African wine and tourism industry plays an important role in the South African economy. In 2008 exports of South African wines outstripped domestic sales in terms of volume for the first time in history, with a whopping 316.8 million litres of wine flowing to foreign shores. Our most popular destinations being the UK, Germany, Netherlands and Sweden In South Africa the wine and wine tourism industry employs an estimated 260 000 people.

According to the IWB's permit application, should field trials lead to commercial release of the GM Sultanas and Chardonnay varieties, they would be destined for the table as well as wines.

The University of Stellenbosch applied for a permit in 2006, but the authorities sent it back requesting further information. "The scanty information supplied in the application relied heavily on outdated and abandoned biosafety studies conducted at the German Institute for Vine Breeding (IVB). The permit has now been granted, but still on condition that further information be supplied", said Swanby.

The African Centre for Biosafety will appeal against the approval of the permit.

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The ACB's scientific assessment of the 2006 application can be found at [http://www.biosafetyafrica.org.za/images/stories/dmdocuments/Objections\\_GM\\_Wine\\_TSGn\\_TCGn\\_10\\_10\\_06.pdf](http://www.biosafetyafrica.org.za/images/stories/dmdocuments/Objections_GM_Wine_TSGn_TCGn_10_10_06.pdf)

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