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GM potatoes rejected in Year of Potato

GM potatoes face import bans and rejection

The United Nations General Assembly has declared 2008 to be the 'International Year of the Potato' in celebration of the potato - one of the world's best loved foods. Yet, South Africa seems hell bent on messing with the humble potato.

Unbeknown to the public, the South African government has allowed the Agricultural Research Council (ARC), supported by USAID and Michigan State University, to experiment with GM potatoes.

What's worse is these experiments have occurred in the open environment for the past seven years where genes could escape. Trials are aiming at commercialisation by 2009.

The GM potato contains an untested transgene, called Bt Cry1Ia1, which produces a poison to kill tuber moths. The tuber moth is one of many insects that cause damage to potatoes. This begs the question of whether 'innocent' insects might be killed too. Gene giant, Syngenta, owns the patent on the Bt gene in the GM potato.

The GM potato is being touted as a wonder product for small-scale and emergent black farmers. However, this 'wonder product' has no superior nutritional benefits and may even be harmful to health.

The African Centre for Biosafety has objected strongly to the field trials. The ongoing squandering of public resources on this project has prompted ACB to release a book entitled 'Hot potato. South Africa's GM potato – a critical analysis' (visit www.biosafetyafrica.net for the executive summary and pdf version of the book).

"The ACB's research reveals multiple dangers for South Africa especially import bans from SA's main potato trading partners, such as Zambia and Angola, both of whom have restricted GM products in the past. Major players such as McCains, which dominate the processing and frozen potato industry have already indicted an unwillingness to use GM potatoes," says Vanessa Black, author of the booklet.

"Indeed, 93% of South Africa's potato exports amounting to 14 million kilograms are exported from SA to various countries in SADC. None of these countries have biosafety laws in place and are therefore unlikely to accept GM potatoes," says Black.

The research also found that the GM potato will contribute few benefits to emerging farmers who frankly cannot afford expensive, patented crops. At best, this GM potato may provide a temporary 'cure' for the tuber moth problem, which in any event, typically accounts for less than 2% of the input costs of growing potatoes.

"The commercialisation of the Bt potato in South Africa will not benefit Africans," comments Mariam Mayet, director of the African Centre for Biosafety. "Rather, the benefits will accrue to US researchers who developed the product and Syngenta, the owner of the key GM gene."

"Syngenta has quietly been working at cornering the GM food potato market; lodging patents in the USA and other countries for a form of terminator technology that prevents potatoes from sprouting unless they are treated with chemicals supplied by the patent owner. "

Today potatoes are South Africa's most loved vegetable providing essential nutrition, especially in poor households. Although South Africans on average eat 29 kilograms of potatoes a year, they have not been consulted on the prospect of yet another staple food being genetically engineered.

"The International Year of the Potato in 2008 is an opportune moment for South Africa to reject and put a stop to the Bt potato project" urges Mayet.

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