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African Centre for Biosafety releases updated GMO biohazard maps

Their ability to escape into the environment is well known. Their safety for people with allergies remains in question. Yet we continue to experiment with genetically modified organisms (GMOs) and some have even been commercially released. And yes, they may be growing, undetected, unmarked and right out in the open in a field near you.

How would you ever know? If the Department of Agriculture and the biotechnology industry have their way, you should never find out. Unless, of course, you fall ill.

These are precisely the concerns that have spurred the African Centre for Biosafety (ACB) to bring information, especially 'biohazard maps', showing the areas in which the trials are taking place, to the general public.

"Questions around GMO field trials in South Africa continue to be asked - where exactly are they happening, when will there be adequate environmental risk assessment and post-release monitoring, what are the effects on neighbours of GMO field trials and what are the cumulative effects of all the field trials that have happened in South Africa?" says ACB director, Mariam Mayet.

Within this context, the African Centre for Biosafety (ACB) has sought to place more information in the public domain and highlight some of the issues around GMO field trials in South Africa.

In January 2007, a briefing document **Field trials of GMOs: who is doing what and where in South Africa** was produced. This was a focus on field trials that occurred in 2006. A GMO Biohazard Map of South Africa was also produced.

In November 2007, data for field trials as well as medical clinical trials for the year were obtained from the Department of Agriculture using the Promotion of Access to Information Act (PAIA). An overview of these GMO trials plus an updated GMO Biohazard Map have just been released and are available on the ACB website.

"The latest report contains both good and bad news," says Mayet. "The good news is that there were significant refusals as a result of anti-GMO activism. More good news is that there were far fewer field trials during 2007 than 2006."

The bad news is that there were 21 different field sites in 2007, as well as 11 medical clinical trials including GM HIV vaccine and GM TB vaccine. "The 21 field sites involved GM potatoes, GM cotton, GM maize, GM sugarcane, GM groundnuts and GM

maize. Trials were conducted by both the gene giants and also public sector research institutions.”

“One of the biggest problems is that neither biotech companies nor the Department of Agriculture are prepared to reveal exactly which fields have been planted with GMOs,” says Mayet. “This is considered ‘commercially confidential information’.”

“The public and farmers are deliberately kept in the dark,” she continues. “This is completely unacceptable. Who will pay for damages to people’s health or the environment? Will our government or Big Biotech foot the bill for the decontamination of our environment or for the damages to traditional and organic seeds?”

“People need to know exactly where these trials are going on and to lobby for more information to be made available,” Mayet insists. “Farmers and smallholders who live next to experimental fields have a right to know, both from a health and environmental point of view.

People should demand that ecological risk assessments are carried out because once crops are commercially released, the genes will migrate into the environment.”

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