

SA biosafety regulators in bed with industry on GM potatoes?

Cape Town 27 July 2004. The South African government has approved a United States funded project that will soon see genetically engineered potatoes sprouting in six secret locations in African soil. Similar potatoes were first grown in the United States but were withdrawn from the market due to consumer resistance.

The announcement of South Africa's authorisation for the project was made on Monday through a press release issued by the USAID and US Department of Agriculture-funded International Service for the Acquisition of Agri-biotech Applications (ISAAA). ISAAA also receives funds from a who's-who of multinational chemical and seed companies: Bayer, CropScience, Monsanto, Pioneer Hi-Bred, Syngenta, Cargill, Dow AgroSciences and KWS SAAT AG.

The potato project, to be run by the Agricultural Research Council (ARC), was authorised despite comprehensive objections raised by the African Centre for Biosafety and Biowatch South Africa.

The South African government is obliged by law to advise objecting groups of the outcome of decisions taken on the release of genetically engineered products. But in this instance, said the African Centre for Biosafety's Mariam Mayet, the Department of Agriculture wanted to give ISAAA the opportunity to first do the public relations work for ARC and for Golden Genomics, a biotechnology consultancy run by Muffy Koch.

Previous field trials conducted by the ARC were found by the objecting groups to have been poorly designed, and they failed to answer key questions regarding the efficacy and safety of engineered potato lines.

The groups received an astonishing paucity of information to prepare their response to the application. Access to information about genetic engineering is presently the subject of High Court litigation brought by Biowatch South Africa against the South African Department of Agriculture.

Biowatch South Africa expressly asked that the decision on the potato project be delayed until the High Court passes judgement in its public interest action challenging government on the secret proliferation of genetically engineered organisms in South Africa.

Mayet said: "We found that the scientific design of the proposed field trials for 2005 were seriously flawed. Ecological impacts on non-target species had only been addressed with limited scope, and key experiments to measure transgene stability and horizontal gene flow were not carried out. We therefore demanded that the trials be halted because they posed an unacceptable risk to the environment."

Elfrieda Pschorn-Strauss of Biowatch South Africa said: "The potato project purports to target small-scale farmers, yet socio-economic impacts of engineered potatoes have

simply not been considered. This is unacceptable. Potatoes are an important crop to the people of South Africa, fast becoming an important staple food."

Although the potato project is partly publicly funded, payment and usage of up to ten patents are still to be negotiated. How can you talk about small-scale farmer benefits on the one hand and patent law on the other, Pschorn-Strauss demanded.

The government was intent on force-feeding unsuspecting South African consumers with genetically engineered potatoes, Mayet said.

ARC apparently plans to commercialise GM potatoes in 2007.