

# SNAPSHOT: South Africa facing a tsunami of risky GMOs

May 2009



## A wave of new GMOs on the scene

The African Centre for Biosafety has closely monitored GMO approvals in South Africa for several years. Several far-reaching changes are currently taking place.

A wave of new GMOs are expected to flood the South African market during 2009, as the backlog of commodity import permits<sup>1</sup> that have been stalled since 2005, are about to be processed. A moratorium was put in place during September/October 2005 by the GMO decision-making body, the Executive Council, at the request of the Department of Trade and Industry (DTI). The DTI was of the opinion that GMOs are not freely traded on the international market and as such, negatively affect the price levels at which these products are traded, and argued that it needed the moratorium in order to enable it to investigate these concerns.

The DTI study is being concluded and there is every sign that the moratorium will be lifted, heralding the opening of the floodgates to a tsunami of new GMOs onto the South African market. These include GM rice and new varieties of food crops such as soya beans and maize containing multiple or “stacked” genes which pose huge risks to human health and the environment. In addition, spurious arguments that GM crops can address the energy, climate and food crisis, supported by vast amounts of money from biotech backers such as the Bill Gates Foundation, are also bringing new GM crops onto the South African scene, such as GM drought resistant maize, GM sugarcane for agrofuels, GM sorghum and GM cassava. What’s more, the GMO Executive council is due to announce in the next few months, whether South Africa will be the only country in the world to have GM potatoes on the market.

## Monsanto’s GM maize varieties causes crop failures

GM crops that have long since been given the green light in South Africa, are behaving in unexpected ways. Recently, three of Monsanto’s GM maize varieties (MON 810, NK 603 and MON 810x NK 603) failed to form cobs, leaving over 200 000 hectares of GM maize barren. These are some of Monsanto’s oldest varieties, with MON 810, being on the market for over a decade. The South African government has been content to allow Monsanto to gag the affected farmers with speedy compensation packages in hope of sweeping the problem under the carpet. This has prompted the ACB to call for an independent panel of biosafety experts to investigate the cause of the crop failures and to disclose the findings to the public.

## Mandatory labelling of GM food in the offing

A ray of hope for the advent of some regulation of the agricultural biotech industry lies in the Department of Trade and Industry’s Consumer Protection Act, which provides for the mandatory labelling of products containing GMOs. This Act was signed by President Motlanthe on the 4th May 2009 and the process of drafting the regulations (secondary

1. Commodity import permit refers to a permit issued for the import of bulk shipments of GMOs imported for direct use as food, feed and processing.

legislation) to implement the Act has begun. Together with the Consumer Protection Act the labelling regulations will not only give consumers a choice, but can also go a long way towards ensuring that efficient segregation and traceability systems are in place to ensure compliance with the legislation. As always, the devil is in the detail, which will have to be thrashed out during the drafting of these regulations – a process which is likely to be extremely contested and controversial.

## New commodities

Two varieties of GM soybean and two stacked gene varieties of GM maize are pending approval by the Executive Council, subject to reports being furnished by Syngenta/Pioneer regarding concerns about allergens and nutrition. (Syngenta maize MIR604xGA21, Syngenta triple stacked Maize Bt11xMIR604xGA21, Pioneer Soybean 356043, and Pioneer Soybean 305423).

New GM varieties of soybean have been approved, which are to be subject to the labelling requirements that may be imposed in terms of the new labelling regime. (Pioneer Soybean 35604 and Pioneer Soybean 305423).

To date, only GM maize commodity permits have been granted, yet in the last year alone, South Africa imported over 2 million metric tonnes of GM maize from Argentina for use mainly as animal feed.

## GM climate crops

Monsanto is in the process of conducting field trials with its “abiotic stress resistant” or drought tolerant GM maize variety (MON 89034). Further, a decision on a new application for field trials for a new stacked variety is due to be made at the next meeting of the Executive Council in June 2009 (MON89034 x NK603).

Crops designed for use as biofuels are big business. Crops such as sugarcane and cassava are at great risk of being employed for this purpose. The South African Sugarcane Research Institute (SASRI) has been given the go ahead for field trials of GM sugarcane (Sugarcane NCo310)

## African heritage crops

A permit to experiment with GM sorghum in a contained facility was granted on appeal by an appeal board, after initially being refused by the Executive Council. This is a Gates Foundation project, spearheaded by Florence Wambugu, in collaboration inter alia, with the Council for Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR).

In the same vein a permit involving field trials of cassava was refused by the Executive Council, and has been taken on appeal by the Agriculture Research Council (ARCH). The outcome of the appeal has been with the Minister of Agriculture since October 2007. The Minister has discretion to either confirm the decision of the appeal board or make another decision. (Cassava TMS60444 Line 3.1 & 3.2)

## More cotton

Towards the end of 2008, Bayer Cropscience published 8 public notices on the same day announcing field trials for new events of GM cotton. At the time of writing, 2 of these have been recommended for approval so far. (Glytol LxLL Cotton 25 and Bayer T304-40).

## Conclusion

Scientists have long since warned that GMO technology is unstable and likely to behave in unexpected ways. Recent crop failures have borne these warnings out, but South Africa's lax and corporate friendly legislation is allowing this alarming episode to be swept under the carpet.

In the meantime, in 2009, the South African government is opening the door to brand new GM crop plants events such as sugarcane and possibly potato. It is also allowing a flood of new GM commodities onto the South Africa market. In addition, the GMO authorities have eagerly embraced GM climate crops, and are seemingly turning a blind eye to the biosafety challenges posed by these. GMO regulatory authorities have shown there is little capacity for administering and monitoring what is already on the market; and the wave of new GMOs that will soon flood the South African market will bring with them new risks to human health, the environment and society as a whole. The African Centre for Biosafety is calling on the South African authorities to urgently put in motion an independent biosafety inquiry into the crop failures in South Africa and ensure that the findings are made available to the public. The ACB also welcomes the window of opportunity created by the drafting of regulations to implement mandatory labelling of GMOs. We trust that the regulations will finally put an end to industry's self regulation and finally give consumers a choice!

## Further reading

Please download our recent publication, 'GMOs in South Africa, 2008 Overview', from the ACB website at <http://www.biosafetyafrica.org.za/index.php/20090128189/GMOs-in-South-Africa-2008-Overviews/menu-id-100026.html>

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