

First GMO seed scandal in Africa: South Africa contaminates the continent

Seed maize from South Africa, claiming to be pure, has been found to be contaminated with genetically modified organisms (GMOs).

The South African branch of US seed giant Pioneer Hi-Bred recently exported contaminated maize seeds to unsuspecting Kenyan farmers.

The maize seeds are contaminated with a genetically engineered variety- MON810- belonging to Monsanto that has not been approved in Kenya. GM maize MON 810 contains a novel gene that is considered unsafe and banned in several European countries.

The contamination of Kenyan seeds comes on the eve of a UN meeting that is tasked with developing internationally liability rules for genetically engineered products.

The contamination was detected by Greenpeace International, who, in cooperation with a coalition of several environmental and farmers' organisations in Kenya, commissioned tests of 19 different seed varieties that were bought in seed stores from key maize producing areas across the country. The tests, conducted by an independent European laboratory, revealed that Pioneer's seed maize PHB 30V53, sold in the Eldoret region of Kenya, is contaminated with MON 810 maize, a variant that is genetically engineered to be insect resistant.

"We call on all African national regulatory agencies to ban any import of seeds from companies that do not guarantee clean seeds that are free from genetic contamination," insists Mariam Mayet director of African Centre for Biosafety (ACB),

"Kenya now needs a strong biosafety bill that puts farmers' and consumer rights first, and we need mandatory international rules that ensure that polluters must pay for genetic contamination."

Some blame for this seed contamination scandal must also lie at the door of the South African government who has allowed the export of unapproved maize in the first place, she contends. "Maize is the most important staple crop in Kenya. Farmers and consumers in all countries, rich and poor, have the right to untainted, safe seeds and food."

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Note:

From 12-19 March, in Cartagena, Colombia, governments will continue to negotiate international rules on liability for damages caused by GMOs. These negotiations take place under the Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety. Some developed countries such as the United States, Japan and New Zealand are opposing a global agreement on GMO liability. The continuing threats to developing country agriculture posed by GMO contamination, as evidenced by this latest contamination scandal, demonstrate the need for legally binding, global rules that ensure that polluters pay if anything goes wrong with genetically modified organisms (GMOs).

In February 2008 the French government decided to ban the cultivation of Monsanto's maize MON 810. The French ban is based on several environmental concerns, such as the impossibility to prevent the dissemination of GM maize into the environment and the possibility of toxic effects on non target organisms, such as earthworms. Besides France five other EU member states (Austria, Greece, Hungary, Italy and Poland) have banned the commercial growing of GM maize MON 810 on the basis of environmental and health concerns .