

MARKETING OF GM POTATOES IN SA IMMINENT:

AFRICAN FARMERS FACE LOSS OF MARKETS AND CONSUMER CONFIDENCE

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2008 has been declared “The Year of the Potato” by the UN General Assembly in honour of the vegetable people around the world love - the humble potato. Ironically, South Africa intends it to be the year that the potato is transformed from a food, into a laboratory made pesticide. The Agricultural Research Council (ARC) has been conducting field trials for several years with a GM potato called Spunta G2, genetically engineered to kill a pest called the Tuber Moth. They have given notice that they will apply to the South African GMO Council for a general release permit in the next few days. The first stage will see farmer participatory trials involving growing, cooking and testing trials, followed by the GM potatoes being made available for commercial growing.

The GM spuds are touted as tools to benefit small-scale farmers. “In reality, the majority of small-scale potato farmers are situated in KwaZulu Natal, where the tuber moth is not a major pest and the expensive patented technology is way beyond their pockets,” said Vanessa Black, who conducted extensive studies for the African Centre for Biosafety (ACB) on GM potatoes. Rather than helping South African farmers (small-scale or commercial), they could end up with produce they cannot move as they face loss of markets.

93% of South Africa’s potato exports are traded in SADC countries, many of which do not have Biosafety Laws in place. For this reason they are likely to ban the purchase of GM potatoes. Even if they are banned they could still contaminate the continent - a pocket of potatoes bought for consumption can easily be taken across borders and ultimately be planted.

Major potato players such as McCains, who dominate the processing and frozen potato industry in South Africa, have indicated their reluctance to use GM potatoes. In the United States, champions of GM technology, GM spuds were shelved because major fast-food chains refused to buy them. Egypt terminated their field trials because their major trading partner, the EU, would not buy them. Now the orphan potato project has found a home - they are being fast-tracked through South Africa’s weak and permissive regulatory framework.

Genetically modified potatoes provide a short-term solution to only one of many problems for potato farmers at great risk to socio-economic, environmental and human wellbeing. According to ACB Outreach Officer Haidee Swanby, “the Swiss Agrochemical Company Syngenta owns the patents on the genes and will benefit hugely while South African farmers take the risk of growing a crop that has limited markets and consumers take the risk of eating a novel food”.

The commercialization of GM potatoes will introduce a new GM staple onto the market while controversy still rages worldwide about the long-term health effects and safety of the technology.

The African Centre for Biosafety (ACB) has done extensive research on genetically modified potatoes and produced a booklet called Hot Potato, which can be downloaded from their website www.biosafetyafrica.net

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Notes to editors:

- The GM potato project is funded by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and has technical support from the Michigan State University.
- South Africans eat on average 29 kilograms of potatoes a year. 93% of South Africa's potato exports, amounting to 43 million kilograms are exported to SADC countries every year, mainly Zambia and Angola