

Press Release from the African Centre for Biosafety

South African Govt rejects GM potato

Johannesburg-15 October 2009

In a damning and ground breaking ruling, South Africa's GM body, the Executive Council (EC), has rejected attempts by the Agriculture Research Council (ARC) to bring GM potatoes to the South African market. The EC cited no less than 11 biosafety and socio economic and agronomic concerns for rejecting ARC's commercial release application. These support the objections raised by the ACB that GM potatoes pose unacceptable risks to human health, the environment and the farming community.

The ARC has touted the GM potato, engineered to resist tuber moths, as a new agricultural technology that will benefit smallholder and commercial farmers. Its five year field trial programme has chewed up considerable public funds as well as having been bankrolled by USAID and Michigan state university.

According to Haidee Swanby of the ACB, "the precautionary decision taken by the EC concluded that ARC's toxicology studies were inadequate, scientifically poorly designed and fundamentally flawed. It was unconvinced that the GM potato would benefit small holder farmers, who are faced with more fundamental production problems such as access to water and seed, and found that the Potato Tuber Moth is a low priority for most farmers."

"We are elated with this decision because it confirms our contention that the GM potato was not developed in answer to pressing problems faced by South African farmers, but rather as a solution developed in search of a problem" said Mariam Mayet, Director of the ACB.

According to Swanby, "Potatoes South Africa, representing commercial and small holder potato farmers opposed ARC's application. Fruit and Veg City, Simba and McDonald's also expressed their opposition to GM potatoes. Consumers in South Africa have also overwhelmingly expressed their opposition."

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The ACB's objection to the ARC application can be found at:

<http://www.biosafetyafrica.org.za/index.php/20091007244/Ojection-to-the-commercial-release-of-th-ARC-GM-Potato/menu-id-100023.html>

The ACB's research booklet on GM Potatoes titled Hot Potato can be found at:

<http://www.biosafetyafrica.org.za/index.php/20080305173/Hot-potato-in-South-Africa/menu-id-100023.html>

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NOTES for EDITOR

- South Africa is the only country on the continent to have commercially released GM food crops (maize and soya) and the only country in the world to have allowed the genetic modification of the staple food (maize).
- Attempts to release GM potatoes onto markets in the United States, Canada and Egypt have all failed in the past. There are no GM potatoes on the market globally.
- Potato South Africa objected to the permit application on the grounds that the technology did not provide significant advantages for farmers while damaging consumer confidence.
- The ARC received technical support in the development of GM potatoes from Michigan State University and was funded by USAID. The patent on the genes is held by the multinational Syngenta.

According to minutes on the Department of Agriculture's Website, the EC denied the General Release of SpuntaG2 on the grounds that:

- The Socio-economic impact study indicates that the commercial farmers do not anticipate this event to present a significant lowering of inputs as the same spraying regime is required to manage other pests which this event does not target
- Small scale farmers identified more pressing challenges relating to production such as lack of water, seed availability, fertilizers, etc
- No evidence is presented that other pest management strategies against PTM have been considered or compared with the release of GM-Spunta
- The applicant presents several arguments of the value of this event for small scale farmers; however, entry of these GM potatoes into the formal trade remains a particular concern. Segregation of GM from non-GM potatoes would require an Identity Preservation System which is currently not in place.
- The capacity of small scale farmers to implement risk management measures could potentially be onerous
- Considering the biology of potatoes, vegetative material (tubers) may be used for propagation, which may complicate risk management
- PTM is not a major pest for stored potatoes but rather rodents
- The Western Blot of transformed potatoes was limited to protein extracts from leaves and there is an assumption that one band represents the Cry1 Ia1 protein. No data is presented of expression levels in tubers
- Concerns on the toxicity testing by use of an animal feeding study was conducted with cooked (boiled) potato although raw freeze dried potato would have been better suited

- No evidence is presented that known allergens of potato, namely Sol t1 (patatin) are not over expressed in the GM potato
- No actual toxicity data of the cry-protein on the target organism PTM is presented

These minutes can be found at www.doa.agric.za under divisions/biosafety/information/july minutes