

GM potato “of no use” in SA

Johannesburg; 10 September 2008: A pest-resistant strain of genetically modified potato, earmarked for possible commercial release in South Africa, will be of no use to local spud farmers, said the African Centre for Biosafety (ACB) this week. It will also increase risk to the farmer in an already volatile agricultural sector.

This statement was in response to the Agricultural Research Council's (ARC) application for permission to release the potato commercially.

A formal objection was made by the ACB to the Department of Agriculture (DoA) this week, and includes concerns expressed by key industry players, namely Potato SA, McCain Foods Limited, McDonald's, Spur, Simba and Fruit & Veg City.

ACB director Mariam Mayet said the organisation objected to the proposed “general release” of the tuber moth resistant potato, SpuntaG2, for which the ARC was seeking permission to release under the Genetically Modified Organisms Act.

Should the ARC's application be approved, it will allow the ARC to make the SpuntaG2 potato available to South African farmers for general use, including commercial farming, thus allowing it to enter the food supply chain.

Farmers will be asked participate in further tests on behalf of the ARC and monitor the potato's efficiency.

“It is highly unusual for a GM rollout, and the first time we've seen this kind of application where agronomic assessments are done by farmers” said Mayet, from the ACB's offices in Johannesburg.

ACB and Potato SA questioned the appropriateness of the cultivar for South African conditions.

“The tuber moth is not high on the list of problem pests for our farmers,” explained Mayet. “This cultivar of potato appears to be a solution, developed in a foreign lab, to search for a problem that hardly exists in South Africa.”

According to the ARC, this GM cultivar will help reduce tuber moth damage in the field as well as in stored potatoes.

“But Potato SA tells us that this moth is ranked sixth in the list of priority pests and diseases, after leaf miner, late and early blight, scab and certain viruses. This is not a major problem for our farmers.”

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Field trials have already been conducted locally on the SpuntaG2, which was engineered in the United States and contains a protein (CryIIa1) that kills the tuber moth. The ARC's permit application is on the strength of these trials.

The ACB objection challenged the results of the trials, which it said were flawed both in their design and interpretation. Furthermore, the lobby questioned the socio-economic benefits of this potato to local commercial and small holder farmers.

Independent socio-economic studies found that this strain of GM potato will not benefit the sector by reducing input costs of pesticides, nor reduce the resultant toxins in the environment, since the same chemicals used to control more serious pests are used to control the tuber moth. It will also increase risk for farmers because of a lack of consumer confidence in genetically modified organisms.

“Our farmers want new cultivars that are drought, pest and disease tolerant. But they don’t list the tuber moth as a significant pest,” concluded Mayet.

Consumer concern

A consumer petition was included in the ACB’s objection submitted to the DoA, signed by over 2 100 people from around the country.

The overarching objection from the public is about the lack of labelling legislation in South Africa, in a context where GM foods are not proven to be safe.

“Consumers are outraged that they have no right to choose what they eat or feed their families because legislation does not require products to show on the labelling whether or not food contains genetically modified organisms,” Mayet concluded.

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