

USDA Foreign Agricultural Service

# GAIN Report

Global Agricultural Information Network

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## **Tunisia**

### **Agricultural Biotechnology Annual**

#### **2011 Agricultural Biotechnology Annual**

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**Report Highlights:**

New Tunisian legislations on biotech expected to be adopted by the parliament in 2010 have been indefinitely postponed. It is unlikely that these legislations would be approved in 2011 until the formation of a new Tunisian government and parliament. Meanwhile, imports of biotech products into Tunisia will continue to be handled in a similar manner to conventional agricultural products. FAS/Tunis continues to assist in building Tunisia's biotechnology research capacity through USDA exchange programs and technical workshops. In October 2010, post conducted a successful outreach activity targeted at policy makers, opinion leaders, legislatures, and civil societies in order to help guide the process of establishing viable biotechnology legislations.

## **Section I. Executive Summary:**

Tunisia still has no legal framework dealing with the introduction, use and marketing of agricultural biotechnology. New legislations on biotech products that were expected to be finalized and adopted by the Tunisian parliament before the end of 2010 have been indefinitely postponed. It is not likely that the new legislations would be approved until the establishment of a new Tunisian government and parliament to replace a caretaker government that was established following the Jasmine Revolution. Currently, there is a lack of consensus on GMO issues in Tunisia as well as an unclear EU position which influences Tunisia's policy regarding biotechnology issues. Until the adoption of a legal framework, the imports of biotech products into Tunisia will continue to be handled in a similar fashion to conventional agricultural products. Although Tunisian officials recognize the existence of GMO materials in imported animal feed products, the dependence of Tunisia's agriculture on these imports as well as increased international acceptance of GMO products have allowed the import of these biotech products to continue.

Tunisia agricultural biotechnology activities continue to be restricted to the research level principally covering applications related to plants, animals and insects. There is government support provided to several biotechnology research institutes that have emerged in Tunisia in recent years allowing the improvement of Tunisia's understanding of biotechnology issues at the research level.

In the past few years, FAS/Tunis carried out several activities aimed at building close working relationships with key players dealing with biotechnology issues in Tunisia. Post sponsored several conferences and supported Cochran and Borlaug programs' participants in biotech activities. In October 2010, Post conducted a successful outreach activity targeted at policy makers, opinion leaders, legislatures, and civil societies in Tunisia in order to help guide the process of establishing viable biotechnology legislations in the country. The outreach workshop, which was heavily attended, received wide and positive media coverage that gave the scientific community an opportunity to engage in the policy debate over various biotechnology subjects in Tunisia.

## **Section II. Plant Biotechnology Trade and Production:**

Tunisia is a net importer of agricultural and food products. In 2010, U.S. agricultural exports to Tunisia reached a record high at \$265 million, with oilseeds, coarse grain, and wheat exports accounting for the bulk of these exports. U.S. wheat, barley and corn exports made a come-back in the Tunisian import market, due to increased local demand and lack of supplies from Black Sea countries, the main grain exporter to the Tunisian market in recent years. The USA ranked as the second largest destination, after the EU market, for Tunisia's olive oil exports absorbing about 26 percent of these exports.

Tunisia agricultural biotechnologies uses are limited to three domains of application: plants, animals and insects. The activities involving biotechnologies such as the production of GMOs and recombinant DNA are restricted to the structures of research. Field-testing and, a fortiori commercial use, are on hold pending the enactment of national biosafety regulations.

Concerning the trade, there is no segregation as both biotech and non-biotech products are handled the same way and no existing laws restrict, control or authorize biotech products trade. A recent study published by the Tunisian Ministry of Health demonstrated that human alimentation in Tunisia was free of GMO while animal feed contain a high level of GMO principally imported corn and soybean meal.

## **Section III. Plant Biotechnology Policy:**

Tunisia is a signatory country of the Cartagena protocol since 2003. However, currently there is no legal framework dealing with the use and release of products of agricultural biotechnology in Tunisia. Two Ministries are involved in the GMO issue, the Ministry of Agriculture, and the Ministry of Environment and Sustainable Development. The Ministry of Health is also involved via its agency, ANCSEP, which is in charge of sanitary and environmental controls of imported goods.

Tunisia is at a crossroads on biotechnology policy. Most of the Tunisian policy-makers see agricultural biotechnologies as useful in addressing the country's chronic agricultural problems such as crop disease, weeds, and irregularity of rainfall. A draft law currently under consideration would establish a legal framework for the importation, commercialization, and usage of biotechnology in agriculture. However, this effort may be compromised by skepticism on the use of biotechnology, a reflection of Tunisia's close ties with Europe. The draft of Tunisia's biosafety regulations is not yet a public document. However, it is reportedly made up of two laws (a draft law related to the confined use, deliberate release and commercialization of biotech products and a draft law related to the import and transit of biotech products), three decrees and three ministerial orders. One of the main provisions of these draft regulations would be the obligation to apply for an authorization prior to importing biotech products into Tunisia. Several laboratories seem to have the potential to carry out GMO testing using PCR-based detection methods, once legislation is in place. It is worth noting that Tunisia is receiving technical assistance from the EU to establish its GMOs testing capacity and that the International Service for the Acquisition of Agri-biotech Application (ISAAA) is planning to open a regional

Biotechnology Information Center (BIC) to be hosted by the ICARDA's office in Tunis. Concerning labeling, it should be noted that Tunisia published a decree in September 3, 2008 (Art. 7) that makes labeling mandatory for all foods products and food ingredients containing GMO.

On the research side, GOT implemented a fully supportive policy for agricultural biotechnology. In 2008 a national laboratory for GMO detection and a research center to assess the risks of using GMO were established. Moreover, GOT's encouragement of biotechnological research contributed to the development of the state of knowledge of Tunisian laboratories' teams. Today, a dozen major institutes conduct biotech research. They are either institutes working under the umbrella of IRESA (Institution of Research and Higher Education), the Ministry of Agriculture such as INRAT (Institut National de Recherche Agronomique de Tunisie), or under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Scientific Research and Technology, such as the Center of Biotechnology in Sfax (CBS) or the Center of Biotechnology of Borj Cedria (CBBC). New molecular biology technologies as viral genome isolation, gene cloning, transformation methods and functional genomics are now established in these laboratories. Several agricultural biotechnologies either at the experimental stage or at the commercial stage such as micropropagation techniques are now used. The latter are widely used to generate disease-free or salinity tolerant planting material mainly for wheat, citrus, date palm and grapevine. FAS/Tunis maintains a close contact with all the above mentioned laboratories and regularly engage them in outreach activities and scientific exchange programs of mutual interest.

#### **Section IV. Plant Biotechnology Marketing Issues:**

There are no significant market acceptance issues related to the sale of biotech products in Tunisia due to the non-existence of GMO food-use on one hand, and the absence of strong consumer movements pushing trade-restrictive agendas on the other hand. However, it is mandatory to inform consumers when genetically engineered (GE) methods of production are involved. According to the September 3, 2008 decree, labeling of food products and food ingredients containing GE organisms is mandatory. However, this obligation is not sufficiently clear and does not provide details on the type of products involved, the percentage of GE material authorized and the authority in charge of the enforcement.

Consumers continue to be largely unaware of the controversial debate between proponents and opponents of biotech at the international level. The biotech debate has not yet reached the public arena although we see from time to time newspaper articles conveying the EU concerns about modern biotechnology. A recent local inquiry showed that only 4% of the Tunisian heard about GMO in the past.

*Who would benefit from the of GMOs in Tunisia?*

Large scale farmers in Tunisia would be interested by GMOs since their adoption will reduce the costs brought by the use of pesticides and irrigation. Moreover the use of GM plants resistant to diseases, salinity or drought would be profitable considering that a reduction of the cost of treatments and an improvement of the yield would be obtained. However the small-scale farms (less than 20 ha) which represents a majority of the total number of the farms in Tunisia might find it less appealing. In such farms, cereal seeds are simply obtained from the previous harvest and no pesticide or herbicide treatments are applied because of their high costs. Consequently the use of GMOs would be possible only through governmental support by subsidizing transgenic seeds for example.

## **Section V. Plant Biotechnology Capacity Building and Outreach:**

The FAS office in Tunis, following an overall regional strategy, supports local interest in biotechnology by developing several activities. Post activities have been focused on identifying key players and on advocating science-based biotech risk assessments and trade-friendly regulations. FAS has been successful in establishing close working relationships with key officials; some of them are influential members of the National Biosafety Committee. FAS will continue promoting exposure and increased familiarity of Tunisian regulators and scientists with biotechnology issues.

### **Outreach Activity: “The Contributions of Plant Biotechnology in Confronting Climate Change”**

In October 2010, FAS/Tunis, in cooperation with the Department of State, organized a well attended workshop targeted at 200 policy makers, opinion leaders, legislatures, and civil societies in Tunisia in order to help guide the process of establishing viable biotechnology legislations in Tunisia. The successful workshop, presented by four U.S. experts from Cornell University, University of California Berkeley, and University of Nevada, addressed several issues related the contributions of plant biotechnology in confronting climate changes and focused on biotech’s role in addressing plant disease, mitigating global warming, and adapting crops to marginal soils. The successful event generated wide positive media coverage and gave the scientific community an opportunity to engage in the policy debate over various biotechnology subjects in Tunisia.

### **Norman E. Borlaug Fellowship program**

Under this program, a Tunisian researcher from CBBC participated in June 2009 in a six-week training program at Oklahoma State University. The program will help Tunisian researchers to improve their knowledge of small grain production and to gain exposure to the latest U.S weed management practices. In addition the program will provide the opportunity for Tunisian scientists and policymakers to establish long-term contacts with U.S. scientists and apply the newly gained knowledge from U.S. laboratories to their research and development programs.

### **Cochran Program**

Post conducted several Cochran programs focusing on giving key government officials an enhanced understanding of commercial realities in the US, so they do not impose restrictive regulations. The last Cochran program exclusively devoted to Biotech was in 2001.

### **Conferences and others activities**

- In the past five years, Post sponsored several conferences and workshops having led, among other outcomes, to supportive articles in local media. Several articles were posted in widely circulated daily newspapers highlighting the U.S. position in using modern biotech to alleviate hunger and malnutrition.
- Post placed a cleared op-ed in local media under the ambassador’s signature explaining reasons

having led the U.S. to file a WTO case against the EU's moratorium on approving agricultural biotechnology products.

## **Section VI. Animal Biotechnology:**

Animal biotechnologies are at their early stages except for basic reproductive biotechnologies such as artificial insemination. Embryo transfer, although technically feasible, has not yet gained a significant uptake in the livestock sector.

## **Section VII: Reference Material**

### ***Appendix I***

Following are the main regulations governing the import of (1) seeds and seedlings, (2) unprocessed food and feed, (3) consumer-oriented products and (4) GMO labeling:

(1) Seeds and seedlings imports must comply with Decree # 2002-621 dated March 19th, 2002. This decree sets rules to import all seeds and seedlings. Apart from the phytosanitary aspects, the main provisions of this decree are the obligation for the importer to apply for a license, to have a minimum storage capacity and to keep records for its inventories. Seeds and seedlings covered by this decree are: potato, citrus, strawberry, pulses, horticultural seeds, forages, cereals and vine.

(2) Unprocessed food and feed: the existing sanitary and phytosanitary rules do not refer to the biotechnology aspects. In Tunisia, phytosanitary control of imported food and feed is regulated by the Law # 92-72 dated August 3<sup>rd</sup> 1992, while sanitary control is covered by the Law # 99-24 dated March 9<sup>th</sup>, 1999. The enforcing authorities are the DGPCQPA (Direction Generale de la Protection et du Controle de la Qualite des Produits Agricoles) and DGSV (Direction Generale des Services Veterinaires), both departments within the Ministry of Agriculture.

(3) Consumer-oriented food products: Apart from the sanitary and phytosanitary laws that apply also to this type of product, consumer-oriented products must comply with the decree dated July, 1985 validating Tunisian standard NT 15-23 (1983) which applies to pre-packed food commodities labeling and presentation. The enforcing authority is the DQPC (Direction Generale de la Protection du Consommateur) of the Ministry of Commerce.

(4) Food labeling: Article 8 of the decree published by the Ministry of trade in 2008 concerning labeling of Foods and Food Ingredients oblige producers to mention clearly in the label GMO presence in the product. This article is not clear since there is no GMO production in Tunisia.