

USDA Foreign Agricultural Service

GAIN Report

Global Agricultural Information Network

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POLICY

Voluntary Public

Date: 4/2/2014

GAIN Report Number:

South Africa - Republic of

Post: Pretoria

Biotech Outreach to the South African Parliament

Report Categories:

Biotechnology - GE Plants and Animals

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Report Highlights:

FAS/Pretoria Senior Agricultural Attaché, Pickelsimer, presented on the benefit of biotechnology to small-holder farmers as part of a State Department funded biotechnology outreach activity, February 25-27. The biotechnology outreach came on the heels of a petition by the African Center for Biosafety (ACB) to overturn South Africa's approval of the importation of 2,4-D corn, a decision made in 2012. The tone of the outreach was notably more positive than an earlier FAS/Pretoria presentation to parliament, which was considered a huge success, in spite of speaking immediately after the ACB petition, which could have artificially raised concerns about biotechnology. FAS/Pretoria will require assistance from the Department of State Bureau of Economic and Business Affairs to track the ongoing developments of the biotech dialogue in South Africa, and participate in future outreach events.

General Information:

Executive Summary: FAS/Pretoria Senior Agricultural Attaché, Pickelsimer, presented on the benefit of biotechnology to small-holder farmers as part of a State Department funded biotechnology outreach activity, February 25-27. FAS/Pretoria strategically targeted a South African small-holder farmer to be the keynote speaker, out of a four speakers, to emphasize the messaging articulated in FAS/Pretoria's presentation. Also in attendance were representatives from the South African Departments of Agriculture, Health, Environment, and Science. The biotechnology outreach came on the heels of a petition by the African Center for Biosafety (ACB) to overturn South Africa's approval of the importation of 2,4-D corn, a decision made in 2012. The tone of the outreach was notably more positive than an earlier FAS/Pretoria presentation to parliament, which was considered a huge success, in spite of speaking immediately after the ACB petition, which could have artificially raised concerns about biotechnology. After the close of our questions and answer session, the Chairman of the Parliamentary Committee on Agriculture, Mr. Lulu Johnson, concluded that there should be a public hearing in the future to help end the debate on the safety of biotechnology in South Africa. FAS/Pretoria will require assistance from the Department of State Bureau of Economic and Business Affairs to track the ongoing developments of the biotech dialogue in South Africa, and participate in future outreach events.

The African Center for Biosafety Petitions Against the Importation of 2,4-D corn

The Chairman began the proceedings by raising the petition made by ACB in 2012 against the South African (SA) approval for the import of 2,4-D corn. After noting that lobbying is allowed in Parliament as part of the democratic process, he turned the floor to ACB for their formal petition and presentation.

ACB began by noting they have not been given access to the science used by the South African Government (SAG) to review the corn event, and were frustrated by their perceived lack of transparency. Through a formal presentation, they distorted the facts of biotechnology with several statements. They stated most forms of biotech are for animal feed only, and not for human consumption and that 2,4-D corn has not been commercialized yet in the US. ACB noted most food is produced by peasant farmers, citing 60 percent, and they will never be able to afford to use biotech, but failed to put subsistence food production in context with commercial production and trade. They made a common argument that nature has adapted to glyphosate, a common herbicide, and noted the use of 2,4-D as an herbicide had been discontinued in Denmark and Sweden. To support their claims that the event was not safe, ACB cited studies from the Suez Canal University in Egypt that linked organ damage in mice with the feeding of biotech corn. While citing the regulatory review for pesticides or pharmaceuticals is more stringent than the regulatory review for biotech commodities, ACB complained that much of the science is not publicly available and cited as business confidential.

In closing their presentation, they cited additional studies linking the use of biotech with increased insect resistance, and complained that South Africa has not conducted a study of the health and environmental impacts of biotechnology on South African consumers and the environment.

Questions to ABC from Parliamentary Members

An African National Congress (ANC) Member of Parliament (MP) noted that a democracy allows for petitions for concerns, but noted that one needs to recognize global population increases, diminished arable land from urbanization, and that people to be fed. Noted he is 73 and can't live without pap and

sour milk (a traditional South African dish), twice a week. He has been eating biotech corn for many years and has no health issues outside of being diabetic. He raised concern over the comment from the petitioner that monitoring and research capacity in the country is lagging. He encouraged the Chairman that the relevant ministries need to be given appropriate funding to do their monitoring and scientific review, and to help small farmers with improving production. He cited increased costs of living by massive taxation, and emphasized the need for affordable food.

A Democratic Alliance (DA) MP noted concerned about the claim that the government does not do research, and wanted to know what the SAG process is for researching and reviewing biotechnology for commercialization? She was also concerned that 2,4-D was previously banned in parts of the country as an herbicide, and asked if it is now allowed? If so, how is it controlled?

An ANC MP stated she thought SA consumers and politicians are confused on biotech. She asked why people in government are worried about safety of biotech and wondered why SA was the only Africa country to approve biotech. She was also concerned that all corn meal (a staple food) in South Africa is biotech, and that she has no choice as a consumer. She noted her concern that she has problems with allergies and doesn't know why, and raised the question if biotech is the culprit to increased allergenicity, or is the technology helping people and prolonging lives?

SAG Departments Respond to ABC

Chairman Johnson allowed for a formal response from the relevant departments involved in the biotech review and approval process. He asked if SA is currently importing 2,4-D corn. The responded that imports of this event are yet to occur.

The Department of Agriculture, Forestry, and Fisheries (DAFF) responded that the commodity clearance of 2,4-D corn was allowed in 2012 for food and feed. They confirmed there have been no imports, but there have been approvals in other countries for commercialization. The South African regulatory system for approvals is rigorous and robust. DAFF concluded by debunking many of the studies cited in ACB's presentation.

The Department of Health (DOH) commented that the department did a study on glyphosate and published the results. They also noted that the Department of Trade and Industry has published the Consumer Protection Act informing consumers that there are biotech ingredients in food through mandatory labelling.

DAFF clarified that the four relevant departments for biotech approvals were all in attendance.

In closing, The Department of the Environment (DOE) commented that their review process is rigorous and they regularly bring in outside scientists to assist.

FAS/Pretoria and Fellow Speakers Shine in Their Outreach

Chairman Johnson turned the floor over to the FAS/Pretoria delegation and asked all speakers identify whether they were linked or funded directly by a private sector company in presenting to Parliament.

The first speaker to discuss the merits of biotechnology in our outreach strategy was Dr. Hennie Groenewald, a researcher with Biosafety South Africa. He opened by noting that he is not linked to any

private sector company, and works for a non-profit organizations that supports the application of safe agricultural technology. Dr. Groenewald emphasized need for governments to fund research and development for agricultural technology in support of food security, and need strong regulatory systems for the safe application of agricultural technology. He stressed the process of risk analysis as being the backbone for reviewing biotech events. He went into detail of the environmental, health, and socio-economic elements of the risk assessment process. Education and communication were also noted as being important, but communication should not be confused with debate, as debate can cloud the understanding of a topic. In closing, he stressed the importance of adopting sustainable technology, and that products must be safe, relevant, profitable, and supported by a scientific risk analysis process.

Dr. Bongani Maseko, AfricaBio (a non-profit biotechnology stakeholders association) Project Manager, clarified his organization is an independent biotech advocacy group promoting the safe and science-based application of technology in Africa and other areas. In his presentation he focused on the agricultural production challenges prevalent in Africa, such as limited access to arable land, water, climate change, and increased urbanization. He pointed out how natural growing plants are a result of nature’s own biotechnology over a longer period of time. One of the biggest issues for the corn farmer has been with the con stalk borer insect, which biotech corn helps reduce the pest pressure immensely. Dr. Bongani discussed the how biotech corn must be planted with refuge area of a conventional crop, and then provided an overview of the costs of conventional versus biotech production, which showed greater on farm revenues through lower input costs. He closed by inviting members of Parliament to visit a farm where biotech corn is being produced and see the results for themselves.

The next presenter was FAS/Pretoria Senior Agricultural Attaché, Corey Pickelsimer. The presentation focused on three specific components. A brief review of the primary message from the FAS/Pretoria’s 2012 Parliamentary outreach, specifically that biotechnology is one important tool in a farmer’s toolbox that should not be taken away or over-regulated. Secondly, the presentation emphasized the benefits of biotechnology to small holder producers around the world. The examples used to show this was the case of Rainbow Papaya rescuing Hawaiian farmers from the Ring virus, the current research in Uganda to address a plant virus threatening a food staple banana variety, and the adoption of biotech cotton in India, which India being one of the world’s producers and exporters of cotton. The last part of my presentation focused on global trade in biotech crops in an effort to dispel any concerns that producing biotech crops would negatively affect South Africa’s ability to export.

Finally, our keynote speaker Ms. Tepsy Ntseoane, a small farmer who received land



FAS/Pretoria Senior Agricultural Attache Pickelsimer with Ms. Tepsy Ntseoane, a small-holder South African farmer producing bt

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through South Africa's land transformation policies and has successfully adopted biotech corn. Ms. Ntseoane began by stating she plants biotech corn and her crops are healthy and beautiful. As her business has become increasingly successful, she hoped to become the most successful South African woman farmer in the future. Much of her discussion to Parliament focused on the history of her business, and why she started planting biotech corn. In 2007, she planted 100 hectares (ha) of conventional corn. Her yields were extremely low as a result of the corn stalk borer pest. She received the same results in 2008, and became worried about whether or not she should abandon growing corn. In 2011, she was introduced to biotech corn by AfricaBio. First she planted two ha and had no corn stalk borer damage and enjoyed a yield of 7 tons per ha on dry land with higher quality corn. This was more than double her previous yields with conventional corn. Today, she has expanded her operation to raising livestock and vegetable production and invited any member of parliament to come visit her farm.

Questions to FAS/Pretoria and Fellow Speakers

The chairman felt the discussion represented a great deal of subjectivity between ACB's petition against biotech corn and the pro-biotech stance taken by FAS/Pretoria and fellow speakers. He suggested that South African legislators come together with a clear consensus on how to move the dialogue forward, in an effort to finalize the ongoing debate and petitioning. He asked if any departments had any responses or points to raise with FAS/Pretoria and colleagues, but no comments or objections to our information were made.

A DA MP praised Ms. Ntseoane as a success story of South Africa's land transformation policies and noted the importance of hearing these stories in Parliament. She echoed earlier comments by an ANC MP that the constraints of increased urbanization, population, and land scarcity are all issues affecting South Africa. She asked all speakers, other than FAS/Pretoria and Tepsy Ntseoane clarify the source of their organizational funding, and asked the FAS/Pretoria delegation and relevant South African departments what is the role of the government in consumer protection and education. She concluded by asking the departments why the 2,4-D herbicide was banned a few years ago in South Africa, but is now approved?

One ANC MP felt the debate on biotechnology will continue and reiterated the Chairman's suggestions that South African regulators and researchers come together and make a declarative statement on the safety of the technology. She felt South African researchers are not in full agreement, which confuses Parliamentarians and consumers. She suggested that there be a public hearing in the future to discuss the matter further.

An ANC MP commented that since the beginning of time, farmers would hold seed back year to year and see diminishing yields. He discussed ongoing research at the South African Agricultural Research Council (ARC) to improve products, such as improved animal genetics through research and breeding. He commented that there have been observable improvements in corn over time, from single cob to double, and dramatically increased yields. In being a diabetic, he noted how his insulin was developed through biotechnology. He asked the relevant regulatory departmental representatives if they regularly interact with the pro- and anti-biotech voices in the public to ensure all concerns are addressed? He also encouraged his fellow MP's that they should visit farms planting biotech corn, and noted that, as a child, his father told him that things unseen are unsold, and people should go out and see the results. In closing, he asked Ms. Ntseoane if she has title to her land received through land transformation policies?

The DA MP and Shadow Minister for Agriculture recalled the brief public concern raised over radiation from cell phones, but studies showed fluorescent lights subject you to higher radiation than cell phones. So the issue is a matter of risk and how much risk people are willing to accept. He noted he was making a plea for biotechnology, but if someone is making a good living out of it then he's pro-choice, but agreed that there should be a comprehensive study or statement for SA researchers as he felt those against biotechnology use arguments and facts that essentially confuse Parliamentarians.

FAS/Pretoria Team Responds to Questions

Senior Agricultural Attaché Pickelsimer responded to issues of risk and communication, and praised the SA regulators present for exercising due diligence in their risk assessments for approving biotech events and also for providing press releases to the public communicating approvals of new events. I emphasized there is no such thing as zero risk in life, and suggested that the MP's view the issue as a matter of trust; trust in their regulatory framework for the review and commercialization of safe products. On communication, I commented that we currently live in a digital age where a press release from DAFF on a biotech event approval does not make front page news. I suggested the Portfolio Committee on Agriculture define a more clear mechanism for regulatory communication to the public to address concerns that consumers were not fully informed.

In response to the question of organizational funding, Dr Bongani responded that AfricaBio received partial funding from seed companies, but also from governments and other sources, which ensures they are an advocate of all forms of agricultural technology, and not a direct extension of private companies. Dr. Groenewald clarified his funding at the beginning of his presentation.

Dr. Groenewald responded to comments on risk and understanding of biotech. He felt public hearings won't clarify anything as a public debate will allow for any ongoing subjectivity to continue in a formal forum. He emphasized is trust in the system. He noted that no one is concerned about the pharmaceutical application of biotechnology, and reiterated the earlier comment by an ANC MP that insulin came as a result of biotechnology.

Ms. Ntseoane responded to the question directed to her, and acknowledged that she is a true success story of biotech, but agreed that more outreach was needed for small-holder farmers and consumers. She felt there needed to be more government funding allocated at the provincial level to help farmers with production issues. In response to the question about having title to her land, she has no title, and can be removed at any time.

DAFF responded to the question about the earlier banning and current approval of 2,4-D herbicide. Several years ago, 2,4-D was problematic in production areas where vegetables were also planted as the herbicide is a broad leaf defoliant. The herbicide was briefly banned until they could better regulate the usage to not affect vegetable farmers. On the question of communication, DAFF noted they have regular interaction with other regulators in other countries and even interact with ACB, or other public interest groups concerned about biotechnology, to address their public comments.

The ANC MP who raised the land tenure question responded that he is disappointed Ms. Ntseoane doesn't have title to her land, as title is critical to the success of a farmer. He felt that the lack of ownership was a disincentive to maintain land infrastructure, and hampers access to credit. He felt farmers need some security of tenure otherwise all farming in South Africa could collapse.

Senior Agricultural Attaché Pickelsimer closed the questions period by noting South Africa's progressive approval of 2,4-D corn served as an excellent example of how a product could be stringently reviewed for environmental and human health and reduce the use of a common herbicide use that had previously affected vegetable producers, and emphasized the importance of trust in rule-makers.

Chairman Johnson closed by saying this discussion began two years ago, but cannot continue forever. He noted that there has been a request for a public hearing. Given the election year, the ongoing discussion will be taken over by a new committee, post-election.