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AGRICULTURAL BIOTECHNOLOGY ANNUAL

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Report Highlights:
New Tunisian legislations concerning the use, marketing and importation of biotech products are currently under review and expected to be finalized and adopted before the end of 2010. Until then, imports of biotech products into Tunisia continue to be handled in the same manner as conventional products. The Government of Tunisia issued a decree in September 2008 that makes labeling of all foods and food ingredients containing GMO mandatory. FAS continues to assist in building Tunisia's biotechnology research capacity. Two Tunisian researchers will participate in biotechnology training in fall 2009 under the Norman Borlaug program.

Section I. Executive Summary:

Tunisia's agricultural biotechnology activities continue to be restricted to the research level, covering principally applications related to plants, animals and insects. Several biotechnology research institutes had emerged in Tunisia in recent years allowing the improvement of Tunisian researcher's levels on biotechnology issues.

Currently, Tunisia has no legal framework dealing with the use and release of agricultural biotechnology products. New legislations dealing with the use, marketing and import of biotech products are currently under review and are expected to be finalized in the next several months and could be adopted by the parliament before the end of 2010. Until the adoption of a legal framework, the imports of biotech products into Tunisia continue to be treated the same way as the conventional agricultural products. Tunisian officials recognize the existence of GMO materials in imported animal feed products. The Tunisian agricultural sector's reliance on these imports has lead to a tacit acceptance of GMO products. Concerning labeling, the GOT published a decree on September 3, 2008 that makes labeling mandatory for all foods and food ingredients containing GMO. The decree, however, is not clear and doesn't give sufficient details on the type of products involved, the percentage of GMO authorized or the government authority in charge of the enforcement of the decree.

FAS conducted several activities aimed at building close relationships with key players and on advocating a trade-friendly stance in Tunisia with regard to GMOs. Post sponsored several conferences and conducted a Cochran program on Biotech in the past. Two Tunisian researchers will participate in a training program at Texas A&M University in fall 2009 under the Norman Borlaug program to work on issues related to small grain production and weed management practices. Thanks to these activities and to other behind-the-scene advocacy actions, Post has been so far successful as U.S.-origin shipments of corn and soybean meal, widely believed to contain various proportions of bio-engineered material, continue to enjoy an unfettered access to the market.

Section II. Biotechnology Trade and Production:

Tunisia is a net importer of agricultural products. In 2008, according to Tunisian data, Tunisia imported $2,719 million and exported $1,767 million of agricultural and food products. Leading imports included wheat ($815 million), vegetable oils ($460 million), corn ($223 million), barley ($160 million) and sugar ($133 million). The United States exported $183 million worth of agricultural and fishery products to Tunisia in 2008. The main U.S. exports included vegetable oils ($54 million), coarse grains ($41 million), soybean oil ($42 million), wheat ($28 million) as well as some shipments of planting seeds.

There is no segregation as both biotech and non-biotech products are handled the same way and no existing law to 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 from the U.S and Argentina.

Tunisia's 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. Progress achieved in recent years in biotechnological research has contributed to the development of the state of the Tunisian laboratories. Today, a dozen major institutes conduct biotech research. They are either institutes working under the umbrella of IRESA (Institution of Research and Higher Education) of 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 such 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 technique, 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.

Section III. New Technologies:

Cloning is not used in Tunisia and FAS is not aware of any discussions of related regulatory or research policies. 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 IV. Biotechnology Policy:

Tunisia was a signatory country of the protocol of Cartagena since 2003. Currently, however, there is no legal framework dealing with the use and release of products of agricultural biotechnology. Tunisian policy-makers, in their majority, see agricultural biotechnologies as useful tools to address the country's agricultural problems ranging from crop diseases, crop weeds and other yield-reducing abiotic stresses such as drought. Two Ministries are involved in GMO issues, the Ministry of Agriculture and the Ministry of Environment and Sustainable

Development as a focal point. The Ministry of Health is also involved via its agency, ANCSEP, which is in charge of sanitary and environmental controls of imported goods.

A National Biosafety Committee composed of several Tunisian experts and scientists was created in 1999, in order to set up a general workable and transparent legal framework for biosafety in Tunisia including GMO. The role of this committee was to define the possible advantages and risks of GMO in order to help policy decisions. The framework developed is to provide guidelines on how to manage and control the risks defined by the protocol of Cartagena. The guidelines include greenhouse containment rules, field trial regulations and guidelines for release into the environment, manipulating, packing and labelling GMO products. Such regulations have already been drafted and submitted for official enactment by the parliament.

The draft of the new Tunisian biosafety regulations is not yet a public document. However, it is reportedly that it consists 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.

Concerning labeling, it must be noted that Tunisia published a decree on September 3, 2008 (Art 7.) that makes labeling mandatory for all foods and food ingredients containing GMO. The Tunisian position on GMO labeling is likely to be influenced by the European Union and the French position on the necessity of informing consumers when Genetic engineering methods of production are involved (Principe de precaution). The decree, however, is not clear and doesn't give sufficient details on the type of products involved, the percentage of GMO authorized and the authority in charge of the enforcement of the decree. According to a member of the Tunisian Biosafety committee, the new biotech law currently under review will clarify several points regarding the labeling issue. It is interesting to note that the decree was issued by the Ministry of Trade while Biotechnology and GMO issues are usually handled by the Ministry of Environment.

Section V. Marketing:

In Tunisia there are no significant market acceptance issues relating to the sale of biotech products due to the non-existence of food-use GMOs having made it to the market on one hand, and the absence of strong consumer movements pushing trade-restrictive agendas on the other hand.

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 Tunisians have heard about GMO in the past. U.S. exports to Tunisia which are likely to contain GMOs (i.e. corn and soybean) are mostly intended for feed usage and thus are less prone to consumer controversy.

Large scale farmers in Tunisia would be interested in GMOs since their adoption will reduce the costs of use of pesticides and herbicides. The use of GM plants resistant to diseases, salinity or drought would also be profitable considering the reduction of the cost of treatments and an improvement of yields. However the question arises for the small-scale farming (less than 20 ha) which represents a majority of the total number of the farms in Tunisia. In such farm, cereal seeds are simply taken out of the previous harvest and no pesticide or herbicide treatments are applied because of their costs. Consequently the use of GMOs would be possible only through governmental support by subsiding transgenic seeds for example.

Section VI. Capacity Building and Outreach:

FAS/Tunis office supports the 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. We have been successful in establishing relationships with key officials; some of them are influential members of the National Biosafety Committee. FAS/Tunis will continue promoting exposure and increased familiarity of Tunisian regulators and scientists with biotechnology.

Norman Borlaug Fellowship program

Under the Norman Borlaug program, two promising Tunisian researchers from the CBS and CBBC will participate in a six-week training program at Texas A&M University in fall 2009. The program will help the Tunisian team improve its knowledge of small grain production and gain exposure to the latest U.S weed management practices. In addition the program will provide the opportunity for the 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 government key officials an enhanced understanding of commercial realities in the US, so they do not impose restrictive regulations. The last Cochran program in Tunisia that was exclusively devoted to Biotech issues was in 2001.

Conferences and others activities

- Post sponsored several conferences and workshops which have led, among other outcomes, to supportive articles in local media. An article, for instance, posted in a widely circulated daily newspaper featured a headline mirroring the US position in using modern biotech to alleviate hunger and malnutrition.
- The agricultural specialist led a delegation of 10 Tunisian risk assessors to attend a 3-day risk assessment workshop in Morocco.
- Post placed a cleared op-ed in local media under the ambassador’s signature explaining reasons that led the U.S. to file a WTO case against the EU’s moratorium on approving agricultural biotechnology products.
- Post teamed up with the Public Affairs section to host a prominent biotech speaker from the U.S. Biotechnology Industry Organization who led a roundtable on the environmental benefits of GMOs and gave a public lecture at a local university.

Section VII. Author Defined:

Section VII: Reference Material

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 19, 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 3rd 1992, while sanitary control is covered by the Law # 99-24 dated March 9th, 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.