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GAIN Report

Global Agricultural Information Network

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South Africa - Republic of

Post: Pretoria

Southern African Countries Discuss Biotech Harmonization Policies

Report Categories:

Biotechnology - GE Plants and Animals

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Report Highlights:

Between March 3-5, AfricaBio in collaboration with the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), South Africa's Department of Agriculture, Forestry, and Fisheries (DAFF), and other international partners, co-hosted a conference that brought together officials from 14 Southern African countries to discuss steps forward to harmonize biotech policies in the region. The group reached consensus that harmonization must advance in the region.

General Information:

AfricaBio, in collaboration with South Africa's Department of Agriculture, Forestry, and Fisheries (DAFF), the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), and other international partners, co-hosted the Southern African Agric-Biotech and Biosafety Conference 2014. The event focused on Smart and Sustainable Agriculture in Southern Africa: Meeting Future Food Needs. The three-day event brought together government and academic representatives in the biotech and biosafety sectors from 14 Southern African Development Community (SADC) members. In addition, regional economic communities like Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA), SADC - Science, Technology and Innovation, and the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) attended the event to discuss the importance of biotech harmonization in the region.

The three day conference included a Farmer's Information Day on March 3, 2014 at Mr. Frans Malela's farm in Matlerekeng, Limpopo Province. Over 120 individuals including farmers, government officials, regulators, extension officers, students, and agribusiness representatives attended the event. The guest speaker was Prof. Maurice Maloney from Australia's Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organization (CSIRO), and was focused on increasing awareness of the benefits of biotech crops, especially for smallholder farmers. The event also included field visits



to focus on biotech corn and maize. The **Farmers and SADC Government Officials at the Farmer's Information Day Event**

U.S. Government contributed to this event by utilizing State Department and USDA biotech outreach funds.

Conference Objectives:

Before the conference, there was a Farmer's Information Day event where all participants had the opportunity to witness first-hand how small scale farmers from South Africa are benefiting by producing biotech crops.

After a day at the farm, the conference took place in Pretoria on March 4-5, 2014. The conference's objectives were:

- Highlight the global adoption of biotech crops, especially in emerging countries (Brazil, Argentina, and South Africa);
- Exchange views on the opportunities and challenges in SADC in relation to trade with biotech commodities and impact on food security in the region;
- Facilitate mutual learning and experience sharing among countries with a view to strengthening and deepening member state engagements and ownership to advance the regional agriculture and food security agenda;

- Facilitate broad-based and inclusive consultations, and dialogue among all relevant stakeholders on ag-biotech and biosafety related matters at regional level; and
- Propose a practical way forward towards the development of a regional policy on biotechnology and discuss the possibilities for harmonizing certain issues of biosafety;
- Showcase the impact of biotech crops on small scale farmers.

Opening Remarks:

The conference was officially opened by Mr. Mortimer Mannya, the Deputy Director-General for Agricultural Production, Health & Food Safety at DAFF. He highlighted the importance of biotech and the need for South Africa to take leadership on biotech issues within SADC. He also expressed how South Africa “believes in biotech and it is part of the country’s comprehensive toolbox for agricultural development”.

In addition, U.S. Ambassador Patrick Gaspard and Ms. Mariam Sow Soumare from NEPAD also delivered opening remarks. U.S. Ambassador Gaspard discussed how “food security will become a greater threat in the coming years due to population growth and resource scarcity”. He also mentioned how “climate change is already posing problems for farmers as weather patterns become more unpredictable”. He drew on his personal connections to Haiti and Congo to relay how agricultural development is needed to alleviate poverty. He further stated that “Sub-Saharan Africa has great potential for higher agricultural output to meet this increasing demand, but will need access to safe and appropriate science and technology to meet agricultural challenges and consumer needs”. He indicated that according to a USDA study, there is a potential of about \$13 billion dollars of consumer food demand in Sub-Saharan Africa, where biotech crops can play a role to meet this surging demand.

Ms. Soumare pointed out that “one of the reasons for the lack of wider adoption of commercialized genetically modified (GM) crops in Africa was the absence of functional regulatory systems, including an inability to perform timely decision-making”. Currently only four African countries produce commercialized GM and a handful are conducting confined field trials of crops of interest. She added that African countries are revisiting their bio-safety legislations, regulations and directives in order to start field-testing of crops of interest or commercialization if appropriate safeguards are in place.

The Brazilian Agricultural Attaché in Pretoria, Mr. Gilmar Henz, gave a presentation on behalf of Mr. Marcus Vinícius Segurado Coelho of the Ministry Agriculture, Livestock and Food Supply in Brazil. His presentation highlighted the history of the development of biosafety regulation in Brazil, the institutional arrangement GM crop regulation. Brazil leads the way on GM crops adoption amongst emerging countries with a total area of 40.3 million hectares planted mainly with GM soybeans, maize and cotton.



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Brazilian Agricultural Attaché, Mr. Gilmar Henz, Speaks About the Brazilian Biotech Experience

From Argentina, the Director of Biotechnology at the Ministry of Agriculture, Dr. Martin Lema, shared his country's perspectives on GM crop adoption and the regulatory framework in Argentina. He pointed out that all the way from the President to the private sector, Argentina is committed to the development of new agricultural technologies. The country was the first in South America to regulate GM crops in 1991 and today ranks as the third-largest grower of GM crops with 24.4 million hectares cultivated in 2013.

In South Africa, the production area of biotech crops continued to expand in 2013 to reach 2.9 million hectares, making South Africa the eighth largest producer of GM crops in the world. Dr Julian Jaftha, Director of DAFF's biotechnology division and chairman of the biotech executive national committee presented on the 15 years of biotech commercialization in South Africa. His presentation covered the evolution of the South Africa regulatory framework and challenges and lessons learned. Mr. Ben Durham, from South Africa's Department of Science and Technology, gave a presentation on the role of Agric-biotech in the South African Bio-economy strategy adopted recently.

The session on the economic impacts of GM crops in South Africa featured presentations by commercial and small scale farmers as well as experts from the University of Pretoria. The afternoon session focused on the outlook of agricultural biotech development and biosafety in Africa and featured a number of experts from regional organizations such as Africa Harvest.

Nest Steps:

The last day of the conference focused on how SADC countries can move forward in advancing the biotech policy harmonization agenda. Regulators from 14 SADC countries shared their countries' regulatory frameworks. It was evident that SADC countries do not have a common approach to biotechnology and biosafety. Unfortunately, the failure of the SADC Secretariat to attend the conference was a huge concern amongst delegates. However, the meeting discussed and made recommendations including requests to the SADC Secretariat that will be delivered by AfricaBio:

1. Assist member states with the enactment of the biosafety bills and implementation.

- SANBio and African Biosafety Network of Expertise (ABNE) were identified as possible regional organizations that could assist in this effort.

2. Resuscitate previous regional biosafety harmonization initiatives.

- AfricaBio was requested to follow-up with the SADC Secretariat regarding the draft position paper of 2012;
- The SADC Secretariat needs to circulate the report and draft roadmap to Member States;

- Communicate on the reconstitution of the SADC Advisory Committee on Biotechnology and Biosafety

3. It was recommended that an advocacy of biotechnology and biosafety need to be enhanced at regional level and also there was a need to organize a regional farmer's platform.

Comments:

During the conference, a consensus was reached that there is a need for the harmonization of biosafety policies in the SADC region. Cooperation at regional level could assist build economies of scale large enough to attract favorable technologies and products to the region. However, a move toward a regional biosafety system in Southern Africa would take years as in the case with COMESA. A number of issues still need to be addressed by the SADC Secretariat. The regional harmonization of biosafety policies remains a huge challenge.

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