

Organisations condemn go-ahead given by South African GMO authorities for GM maize seed

Non-governmental and farmer organisations from South Africa, Tanzania, Mozambique, Kenya and Uganda strongly condemn the go-ahead given by the South African GMO authorities for Monsanto to commercially sell its genetically modified (GM) "drought tolerant" maize seed for cultivation in South Africa.



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According to the groups, there is no evidence showing that the drought-tolerant trait even works. According to *Mariam Mayet of the ACB, "the GM maize (MON87460) has not undergone proper risk assessment anywhere in the world and has no history of safe use. South Africans who are already being force-fed with old risky GM traits will now be subject to an utterly new foreign, untested and risky transgene in their daily food."

The WEMA project

MON 87460 stems from of a Monsanto/Gates Foundation project, Water Efficient Maize for Africa (WEMA). Other key project partners include the Howard Buffet Foundation, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and the International Maize and Wheat Improvement Centre (CIMMYT). The project is being implemented in South Africa, Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania and Mozambique, and offers the GM drought tolerant maize to smallholder farmers in Africa as a 'Climate Smart' solution to abiotic stresses such as drought.

So far, a whopping US\$85 million has been injected into the WEMA project, while Monsanto has "donated" its drought-tolerant technology, which contains a bacterial cold shock protein gene (-csp), its insect resistant bt gene (Cry1Ab) and technical expertise. The insect resistant gene (Cry1Ab) "donated" by Monsanto to WEMA is an old throw-away technology, now discontinued in South Africa, where massive pest resistance is widely reported.

According to Daniel Maingi of the Kenya Food Rights Alliance, "a single drought tolerant gene is not up to the task of providing a solution to the complex physiology of drought tolerance. Ironically, using simple agroecological practices, such as organic matter and mulching, farmers can obtain even higher yield savings than this expensive technology offered by WEMA."

WEMA strong-arming countries into emending biosafety and seed laws

The WEMA project has been slammed for strong-arming the governments of Tanzania and Mozambique into amending biosafety and seed laws in order to pave the way for eventual roll-out of the GM drought tolerant maize in those countries. In Kenya the import ban on GMOs is coming under increasing pressure from the WEMA project, and in Uganda pressure is being exerted on Parliamentarians to pass a permissive Biosafety Bill.

WEMA field trials began in late 2010 in Kenya and Uganda. However, regulatory issues as well as fierce resistance to GMOs have made commercialisation in these countries impossible. In Kenya, a Parliamentary Decree, passed in 2012, banned the import of GMOs into the country, pending investigation into their potential impacts. A task force has reported to the Kenyan Parliament concerns over lack of safety data on GMOs and related pesticides and lack of government capacity to assess and monitor the impact of GMOs.

According to Anne Maina of KBioC, "news that South Africa has allowed the commercial growing of Monsanto's GM drought tolerant maize will greatly embolden the WEMA lobby into pressuring our Parliament to relax the current ban, despite the stark warnings of the GMO task force". In Uganda, the National Biotechnology and Biosafety Bill was approved by Cabinet in May 2015, and according to ESAFF Uganda, there is tremendous pressure for Parliament to pass the Bill.

"Mock trials" have been held in Tanzania and Mozambique in 2009 and 2010 respectively. Both countries had "strict liability" provisions in their respective biosafety laws. Under severe and sustained pressure from scientists associated with the WEMA project, these provisions were changed to fault based liability.

Abdallah Mkindi of the Tanzania Biodiversity Alliance (TABIO) said that "Tanzania had one of the best biosafety regimes on the continent, which has now been undemocratically amended so that this false climate solution - GM drought maize - can be introduced into the country. The real solution to prepare for climate change is to support smallholder producers to sustain and increase agricultural diversity and resilience, do away with harmful chemicals and place smallholders at the centre of control over their resources and decision-making."

Mozambique's Seed Law explicitly did not allow the importation of GM seed into the country. This law has been amended to allow for GM seed to be imported. The current seed law, approved by the Council of Ministers in 2013 and made available publicly in 2014, in terms of Article 47 (3), states that the importation of GMO seed is permitted under the provisions of specific legislation, contrary to Article 33 of the original law that forbade and banned the import and use of GM seed in Mozambique. Consequently, authorities in Mozambique approved field trials of GM drought tolerant maize in Chokwe.

Food and seed sovereignty is the solution

Agostinho Bento of UNAC, a member of La Via Campesina Africa, said that "the solution to hunger and climate change is food and seed sovereignty, but WEMA is rolling out the red carpet for agribusiness, which profits from creating farmer dependence on their risky products. We reject WEMA and Monsanto's bogus drought-tolerant GM maize and demand food sovereignty in our countries".

According to Mayet, "the ACB is strongly considering appealing against the decision of the South African authorities in granting approval for this sham GM drought tolerant maize."

**Editors note: After the publication of this article, Hans Lombard, consultant to the agricultural biotechnology industry, has made the following commentary with regards to Mariam Mayet's allegations that "organisations condemn GM maize seed" alleging that Monsanto's GM maize MON 87460 "had not undergone proper risk assessment anywhere in the*

world with no history of safe use":

Before government approval and release in South Africa, MON 87460, marketed as DroughtGard, had undergone the strictest legally required tests specified by government regulatory authorities in the USA, East Africa and South Africa.

MON 87460 was first commercialised in the USA in 2013 following several years of trials and tests. In 2012, 250 USA farmers conducted extensive on-farm testing and trials. Yields averaged up to six bushels/acre (376.60kg/ha) more than conventional maize. On 300ha, this equals 112.98MT. At the current price of R3,000/ton, this means an extra income of R338,940.

In 2013, some 50,000ha was planted in the USA. In 2014, this shot up to 275,000 ha. Field trials in South and East Africa have been ongoing since 2009. In 2014 in Kenya, 80 tonnes of certified seed of the same product with the same drought gene, donated royalty-free by Monsanto, DroughtTego WE3127 developed by WEMA (Water Efficient Maize for Africa), were sold to smallholder farmers targeting 250,000 farm households. According to Dr Sylvester Oikeh of the African Agricultural Technology Foundation (AATF), who launched the project, trials showed that yields increased from 1.8t/ha to a whopping 4.5t/ha compared to conventional.

Oikeh says with a yield increase of 20%-25% an additional two million MT of maize, less drop more crop can be produced during drought years to feed 14-21 million Africans in Sub-Saharan Africa.

The same seed, in December 2014, was made available by the South African Research Council to smallholder farmers in South Africa. At Mooifontein in the North West Province, with one of the worst droughts ever, smallholder farmers reported yields of 2.8t/h compared to 1.5t/ha with conventional maize.

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