

Springing genetically modified crops

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The planting of genetically modified (GM) crops in SA and the rest of the world is surging ahead, the latest annual figures show. But an anti-GM organisation has blasted the figures as irrelevant, poorly sourced and “half baked”.

The International Service for the Acquisition of Agri-biotech Applications (Isaaa) claims that “a record 14m small and large farmers in 25 countries planted 134mha [with GM crops] in 2009, an increase of 7% or 9mha over 2008”.

Isaaa says the “80-fold” increase in GM crop hectares since its adoption in 1996 makes it “the fastest-adopted crop technology in the recent history of agriculture”.

SA increased its area planted with GM crops (maize, soya and cotton) to 2,1mha from 1,8mha in 2008. This maintained the country's number eight position in terms of GM crops planted.

However, the anti-GM lobby group, African Centre for Biosafety (ACB), claims “only 2.7% of global agricultural land is planted to GM crops, with the majority being in the US, Brazil and Argentina”.

It says the three countries account for almost 80% of GM crops grown globally and, “in reality, the numbers of hectares planted to GM are of less importance than questions about food security and sovereignty, equity and justice”.

The ACB says there is no official record-keeping by the SA government of the number of hectares growing GM crops. “If indeed 1,8mha of GM maize, soya and cotton are growing in SA [in 2008], as the Isaaa reports, the alarming lack of political will for monitoring should be the focus of the discussion, rather than the celebration of its expansion.”

Isaaa says: “More than half (54%, or 3,6bn) of the world's population live in the 25 countries that planted biotech (GM) crops.” A further 32 countries have granted regulatory approval to import GM crops for food and feed, Isaaa says.

The most popular GM crops are maize, soya beans, cotton and canola.

China has issued biosafety certificates for GM rice, the world's most important food crop.

However, India has put on hold plans to develop GM brinjal, and this has been hailed as a victory by both lobby groups.

Isaaa says: “A landmark decision was made ... to recommend the commercial release of Bt brinjal, now pending final clearance by the government.”

The ACB says: "It is significant to note the spectacular rejection by the Indian authorities last month of a commercial release application for Bt brinjal."

Environment minister Jairam Ramesh reportedly placed a moratorium on the release of Bt brinjal until independent scientific studies established its safety. (Bt refers to a bacterium that kills pests.)

Biotechnology consultant Wynand van der Walt says SA's Genetically Modified Organisms Act provides for measures to promote the responsible development, production, use and application of GM organisms, and sees to safety evaluations for humans, animals and the environment. "There exists no such proactive safety for products derived through conventional or organic farming."

Source: Financial Mail

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