

# Govt prioritises biosafety in genetically-modified farm produce

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Government is making biosafety a priority not only in terms of genetically-modified organisms in food but also in terms of food products entering the country's borders.

Chantal Arendse of the Biosafety Directorate in the Department of Agriculture said on Wednesday, 26 June 2008, that while government was treading a fine line between those in favour and those opposed genetically modified organisms (GM organisms), strides were being made in biosafety.

Arendse was speaking at a seminar organised by the Public Understanding of Biotechnology (PUB) programme, which is a project of the South African Agency for Science and Technology Advancement (SAASTA).

SAASTA itself is a business unit of the Department of Science and Technology's National Research Foundation, which is implementing the PUB programme across all sectors of society.

One of the key missions of the PUB programme is to promote a clear, balanced understanding of the potential of biotechnology and to ensure broad public awareness, dialogue and debate about biotechnology.

## Increase in GM crops

Arendse said that there has been a 12% increase in planting of GM crops worldwide from 2006 to 2007, and that the department was beginning to prioritise this area of research, with substantial parts of South Africa's large maize production already transgenic or effected by GM technology.

Local soya and cotton crops also have a GM component, Arendse told the seminar, as government is mandated to ensure that all activities relating to the organisms are carried out responsibly.

## No seperate systems

She added that there is as yet no segregation between genetically-modified and non-genetically modified foods in South Africa, but systems were being developed.

The responsibility for enforcing the labelling of such products lies with the Department of Health.

## Argument for field trials

At the event, Professor Melané Vivier of the Institute of Wine Biotechnology at the University of Stellenbosch presented an argument for allowing field trials of transgenic grapevines in South Africa.

The application by the institute for such an experimental trial involving transgenic grapevines had been made but not yet approved, the professor said.

Vivier said that while the public notification by the institute had drawn widespread controversy among the public and in the media, the use of such technology in South Africa's wine industry could hold potential benefits for the consumer.

## **Damage resistant?**

The use of such agrobiotechnology could lead to "genetically improved" grapevines that could be resistant to detrimental fungi, or grapevines that would be more environmentally friendly in that they could be engineered to not require harmful pesticides.

The grapevine, *Vitis vinifera*, is one of the most important fruit crops of the world and requires large amounts of spraying with chemicals such as pesticides.

A genetically-engineered vine could be resistant to the damage caused by insects and other elements, while also being engineered to endure "stress tolerance" from less water, in a world where weather patterns are changing as a result of climate change and where water may become scarcer than it already is.

## **In use**

Winemakers in the United States and Canada are already using this technology, while research is being conducted in Argentina, Chile and South Africa, media representatives heard.

At the moment, the Institute of Wine Biotechnology currently has a field of genetically unaltered vines planted in a field at its experimental farm, Welgevallen, in Stellenbosch as it awaits permission to go ahead with genetic experimentation, Professor Vivier said.

She said the institute wanted to evaluate inherent risks that might be linked to biosafety from using GM vines.

## **Acceptance from international markets**

Meanwhile, responding to a question around the hesitation of key markets for South African wines, such as the United Kingdom Dr Viresh Ramburan, from the Institute of Wine Biotechnology, said markets were different.

South African winemakers using GM products have to look at markets that do accept the technology.

He added that it was unlikely that the South African wine industry would support GM wines unless this became widely internationally accepted.

The UK is resistant to GM produce, but consumes as much as 28% of South African wines, and as such is a major consumer of South African wines and a key market.

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