

Resistance to GM crops may be waning

While SA has been growing genetically modified (GM) crops for many years, resistance from across most of the continent is set to slow global plans to turn Africa into the world's breadbasket.



Just four countries on the continent - SA, Egypt, Burkina Faso and Sudan - allow GM crops to be grown commercially. Until 2008, SA was the only African country to commercially cultivate GM crops such as maize, soya beans and cotton.

In that year Egypt joined in, with a limited amount of GM maize cultivation. then Burkina Faso followed, allowing GM cotton to be grown and last year Sudan started cultivating the non-food crop as well.

Most of the unused land available for farming is in Africa, casting the continent in the role of "saviour" in a world which has to double food production by 2050 to feed a population projected to grow to more than 9bn.

SA has about 3m hectares cultivating GM crops. The areas planted in the other three African countries are negligible. However, there are signs that the situation might change. Cameroon, Kenya, Malawi, Ghana and Uganda have approved confined trials of GM crops and Nigeria has a bill to relax laws about GM crops awaiting approval.

Jannie de Villiers, chairman of grain producers' body Grain SA, said last week GM food is an integral part of SA's food security. "The rest of Africa is not positive about growing GM food, though they don't mind eating it. The problem is that the calculated potential of the area that is available for maize growing in Africa is based on higher-yielding GM crops."

No Lobbying

Multinational DuPont Pioneer, which last week completed the purchase of 80% of South African seed company Pannar, makes no secret of its views on Africa as a future world breadbasket. However, it denies it is lobbying African governments to change their policies on GM crops.

Vice-president Dan Jacobi said the company "works to partner with African governments to develop open, consistent

science-based regulatory systems that allow cross-border shipping of high-quality hybrid seed".

He insisted that the company is "comfortable" with African resistance to GM crops but added that farmers in Africa can double, triple or quadruple their yields.

"We advise farmers but do not dictate to them," Jacobi said. "We think GM is one tool in the toolbox." He said that the company's R62m technology hub network centred in Delmas would make a big difference in providing stress-tolerant hybrid seeds to the market.

Political and economic pressures play a big role in maintaining the status quo in Africa regarding GM crops.

Chance Kabaye, director of Zambia's Indaba Agricultural Policy Research Institute and a former agriculture minister, recalled former president Levy Mwanawasa saying GM would only be allowed in Zambia "over my dead body". Kabaye told the Bureau for Food and Agricultural Policy in Pretoria that Mwanawasa "was uncertain about it at the time and made what he regarded as a popular statement.

Mwanawasa died in 2008.

The biggest hurdle for African countries to negotiate in the GM question is possible sanctions from their biggest agricultural export market, the European Union (EU).

The EU has clashed with the US - the world's biggest producer of GM food - in world trade forums over GM food, although it seems the emphasis of the trading bloc's objections has now shifted from safety concerns to political and economic arguments.

With no evidence of health problems arising from GM, opponents say accepting GM crops concentrates power in seed companies that develop and market them. Spokesmen for the biggest company, Monsanto, argue that their products improve yields while using fewer resources to produce.

Source: Financial Mail via I-Net Bridge

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