

## **GMO cotton trials approved**

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**By Ronald Kalyango**

CONFINED field trials of genetically modified (GM) cotton has been approved in Uganda. Cotton becomes the second GM crop, after bananas to be approved by the National Biosafety Committee (NBC). Confined field trials are studies that are made by scientists to collect information on any new varieties developed at research stations within the country or outside.

Early last year, scientists at the National Agricultural Biotechnology Centre (NABC) in Kawanda, Wakiso district successfully planted GM bananas believed to be resistant to Black Sigatoka disease.

Black Sigatoka is a disease that causes premature drying and death of banana leaves, leading to significant reduction in yields.

The GM cotton to be planted is believed to be resistant to the cotton bollworm and tolerant to herbicides. The trials shall be carried out by scientists at the National Semi-Arid Resources Research Institute (NaSARRI) in Soroti and Mobuku in Kasese districts.

"The GM banana trial is of great significant because it is the first testing of GM plants in Uganda," explained Dr. Andrew Kiggundu, a research scientist at NABC. When the trials are successful, it would become easy for the GM's introduction and commercialisation use on variety, patent and ownership rights between the Government and technology providers.

However, stakeholders warn that there is need to hasten gazetting of the Biotechnology and Biosafety policy for deriving the required Bill and Act. The policy, drafted in 2003, is yet to be tabled in Cabinet and Parliament.

"We had moved fast, but the death of Omwony Ojwok, the state minister of economic planning has stalled the process," noted Arthur Makara, an official at the Uganda National Council for Science and Technology (UNCST). He added that they had had a meeting with Fred Omach, the state minister for finance and were optimistic that the policy will be discussed by Cabinet as soon as possible.

By October last year, Kenya was already discussing possible ways of passing the Biosafety Bill into a Law.

"The fact that the Kenyan parliament started the discussions late last year, is a sign that when the GMOs are approved in Kenya, there is no way they will fail to find their way into the Ugandan markets," said Prof Adipala Ekwamu, the coordinator of Regional University Forum for Capacity Development in Agriculture. It also means that local farmers could soon start growing the high yielding and fast- maturing GMOs.

Biotechnology provides new and promising opportunities for achieving greater food security, reducing poverty and improving the quality of life for marginalised people in developing countries.

However, concerns about the environmental and food safety of GMOs and biotechnology-derived products have generated extensive international debate regarding the desirability of GMOs, and lack of enough information regarding the actual impact of GMOs on the environment and human health.

Jolly Sabune, the managing director of the Cotton Development Organisation, said when the Bt Cotton gene is imported, the productivity of the local varieties would be increased. After about three years of trials, farmers will be technically guided on adoption of seeds for planting. On patent rights, she said UNCST and the technology providers would agree for the rights to be shared. "We are insisting that since the technology providers give Uganda the ownership of the local varieties," Sabune said.

Makara said the approval by NBC implies that before the research permit is issued by UNCST to scientists to carry out research, a number of issues have to be met. "Some of the conditions were

to take the NBC members to Soroti and Mobuku where the confined field trials are going to be conducted. This has been done and we are waiting for a few technical issues to be addressed before importation of the genes begins.”

Dr. Emeetai Areke, the director of NaSSARI, also the principal investigator of the research, said the scientists would gather data from the trials that will be used in the development of GM cotton suited for Ugandan conditions. He anticipates that the trials in Soroti will begin during the May-June planting season and in Mobuku, Kasese district by July.