

# Parliament Called Upon To Enact Law Governing Biotechnology

*Combined Media Team Report at Ankrah Foundation, Mukono.*

Unless parliament urgently approves a biotechnology law, the release of the long awaited Genetically Modified bananas now under research study at the national Agricultural Research Laboratories Institute at Kawanda will be delayed. The law provides guidelines and regulations governing biotechnology development. Senior researchers speaking to a team of science journalists at a training workshop for journalists at the Ankrah Foundation in Mukono said the approval of an enabling law was critical in ensuring progress in biotechnology research.

Dr. Maxwell Otim, the Deputy Executive Secretary of the Uganda National Council for Science and Technology said the draft biotechnology policy document is awaiting cabinet discussion before forwarding to parliament a draft bill to be debated and eventually passed into law.

Several scientists interviewed said that without a law the research on biotechnology is like working in the dark. "A biotechnology law will provide the overall framework for regulating of modern biotechnology products in the country as well as stimulate further research, partnership and transformation of desirable products for the

end users," said Dr. Andrew Kiggundu, a senior researcher at Kawanda.

Dr. Kiggundu who is heading the biotechnology research on bananas at Kawanda told journalists on a field tour of the ultra modern research facility that the laboratory research was getting on well with the first batch of Genetically Modified bananas already produced and being tested.

"The bananas you see behind this fence are the first lot of Genetically Modified bananas in Uganda. They are under confinement in what we call a Confined Field Trial facility. But even if we finished all the research work tomorrow we cannot take it to the farm field trials or move further to the product development stage because of no law or legal policy framework to guide us," lamented Kiggundu.

The banana crop is threatened with extinction because of extreme pressure from a host of pests and diseases. These include black sigatoka, bacterial wilt disease, weevils and nematodes. The declining soil fertility is another threat. These have combined to destroy large tracts of banana plantations. The matooke varieties which form a staple food for most of Uganda as well as the sweet banana varieties have all been attacked.

In what may be seen as a precautionary development, scientists at Kawanda are engaged in concerted efforts to conserve the available banana varieties by setting up conservation plantations so that the genes are preserved for future production. The regional coordinator of the Program for Biosafety Systems (PBS) Dr. Theresa Sengooba encouraged further strengthening of the working relationship with the media. She emphasized that it was essential to engage the journalists so that the policy makers and the public can understand and appreciate the issues on biotechnology and biosafety. Biotechnology in the past has received a lot of negative publicity mainly because there has been insufficient understanding of the issues by the media and the public. "If the media does not understand biotech in general then it will be difficult for the public to understand it," commented Dr. Otim.

One of the major workshop recommendations by the media was the setting up of a public discussion forum over the radio waves to educate the public on biotechnology and the life sciences in general. It was suggested that it should take a similar format to the popular political for a known as 'Ebimeeza.'