

A Declaration of Asian Farmers Regional Network (ASFARNET)- Philippines In Support of Biotechnology

The Philippines is badly hit by last year's food crisis and this year's economic crunch. With the increasing population and depleting agricultural resources such as water and prime agricultural lands, the Philippine population which is currently at around 92 million would need to double its efforts to supply sufficient food.

As signatory to the United Nations' Millennium Development Goals that is aimed to reduce hunger and poverty in half by 2015, food availability and accessibility should therefore be given a much closer look to identify strategies to solve this problem in the midst of increased population and food demand, decreasing food production resources and increasing effects of climate change.

Crops developed through modern methods of plant breeding termed as biotechnology are already available in the market. Commonly called as biotech crops, soybean, corn, rapeseed and cotton with resistance to pests and diseases and improved nutritional quality have been accepted and being cultivated globally in 25 countries and being used as food and feed in 30 other countries in 2008. Biotech soybean accounts for 70% of the global soybean production, 46% for biotech cotton, 24% for maize, and 20% for canola.

In the Philippines, more than 350,000 hectares of biotech corn was planted in 2008 by about 100,000 farmers, several fold increase from the initial 20,000 hectares in 2003 when it was first planted. Several biotech crop products are now under development by various government and international agricultural research centers such as Philippine Rice Research Institute, University of the Philippines at Los Banos, Visayas State University and International Rice Research Institute. Other biotechnology tools such as tissue culture, marker-assisted breeding, artificial insemination in livestock are routinely utilized in plant and animal improvement and production. Sectors such as fisheries and forestry likewise employ biotechnology interventions.

With the acceptance of biotech crops and associated methodologies, there is thus an urgent need for the farmers, agricultural technicians, and local and provincial agricultural units to be well-informed on the latest technology and developments so that related technology policies can be issued. This is crucial as biotech crops form a substantial bulk of food and feed products and its derivatives are widely found in many consumer products.

Food and feed safety of commercially available biotech crops has been thoroughly and scientifically studied using procedures that were developed specially for biotech crops – which are ironically more stringent, in the country of origin. Importing countries that have GM regulations require these dossiers before any entry approval is given. This ensures that the biotech food or feed material will not pose any danger to the health and safety of humans and animals.

Similarly, the environmental safety of the commercially available biotech crop has been evaluated in the country of origin. Environmental safety regulations are already being followed in the development of biotech crops making sure that the introduced

genes will not pose any harmful effects to the soil flora and fauna, the non-target organisms, and water resources, and strategies are already known to mitigate gene flow to neighboring crops as well as promote product stewardship.

Thus, in order for the Philippines to make a positive impact towards the alleviation of the existing food problems, we, the members of ASFARNET- Philippines in this organizational meeting and workshop held in Asia Room, IRRI, College, Los Banos, Laguna on 22-23 July 2009 hereby declare that:

1. Biotechnology offers solutions in the alleviation of agricultural problems. The immediate development and utilization of biotechnology and genetically-modified organisms would contribute in increasing the productivity of agricultural lands for increased food, feed and fiber security, in controlling pest and diseases, in developing new consumable products, and in tapping renewable energy source
2. Biotech crops and products that have undergone intensive food and environment safety tests are considered safe for consumption and cultivation.
3. Promotion and support from government in terms of policy regulations are needed to enhance adoption of biotech products and to provide appropriate, timely, and accurate information in order to uphold “farmers’ choice” in the adoption of new farming technologies and products.
4. Biotechnology awareness building strategies need to be strengthened to encourage and improve stakeholder and public participation in the decision-making process on biotechnology-related issues.
5. Biotechnology awareness program by established private and public sectors should be encouraged to increase biotechnology acceptance in the country.
6. Scientist and farmer discussions involving the developments in biotechnology should be continually conducted to enhance adoption of biotech crops in the country so as to reap the benefits from the technology.

Signed by:

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Handwritten signatures of the individuals listed on the left, each on a horizontal line.