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Tunisia

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Report Highlights:

Tunisia currently has no legal framework for the production, use or marketing of agricultural biotechnology. Draft biotechnology regulations put forward in 2010 were not approved by Parliament, and neither was the draft biosafety regulation that was completed in 2014. Until a law is in place, imports of genetically engineered (GE) commodities will continue to be handled in a manner similar to products of conventional agriculture. Tunisia imports a significant amount of commodities such as corn, soybeans and soybean meal for its animal feed sector. Any agricultural biotechnology activity is confined to research as scientists continue to improve their understanding. FAS/Tunis continues its effort to help Tunisia realize a viable and science-based regulatory approach to biotechnology and has supported several participants in this regard through the Cochran and Borlaug programs.

Section I. Executive Summary:

Tunisia still has no legal framework for the production, use or marketing of agricultural biotechnology. The finalization of draft biotechnology regulations was preempted by Tunisia's 2010 revolution, which became the catalyst for change throughout the region. As Tunisia continues its transition to a more democratic system, it is prioritizing among the myriad social, economic and security concerns it is facing. In this context, draft biotech regulations are unlikely to be a focus in the near term. Until a law is in place, imports of GE commodities will continue to be handled in a manner similar to products of conventional agriculture.

At present, there is no public debate of biotechnology in Tunisia. Public awareness is very low and the prevailing sentiment is that Tunisian food products are free of GE ingredients. The situation is likely to change considerably when biotechnology regulations are again put forward for review. The debate will certainly be lively as Tunisians exercise their newly-acquired freedom of speech during the mandated public consultation period. Given Tunisia's close ties to the European Union (EU), agricultural biotechnology opponents will undoubtedly be influenced by EU policy.

Tunisian officials are aware of the existence of GE materials in imported animal feed. Nevertheless, due to the importance of these GE commodities in providing necessary animal protein, as well as their increased international acceptance, imports have been allowed to continue unhindered.

In Tunisia, agricultural biotechnology activities are limited to research as there is no biotechnology regulation in place to address the use, release or commercialization of agricultural products derived from biotechnology. The government does provide some support to research institutes engaged in biotechnology research, and in so doing helps to improve Tunisia's understanding of biotechnology at the research level.

Table of Contents

Report Highlights

Section I: Executive Summary.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Section II. Plant and Animal Biotechnology	4
CHAPTER 1: PLANT BIOTECHNOLOGY	4
PART A: Production and Trade.....	4
PART B: Policy.....	5
PART C: Marketing.....	7
CHAPTER 2: ANIMAL BIOTECHNOLOGY	7
PART D: Production and Trade.....	7
PART E: Policy.....	8
PART F: Marketing.....	8

Section II. Plant and Animal Biotechnology

CHAPTER 1: PLANT BIOTECHNOLOGY

PART A: Production and Trade

- a) **Product Development:** Tunisia has no GE products, seed or propagation material under development. Agricultural biotechnology activities relevant to plant, animals or insects are restricted to research as Tunisia does not yet have a biosafety framework or biotech regulations.
- b) **Commercial production:** Tunisia does not commercially cultivate any GE crops or seeds for production.
- c) **Exports:** Tunisia does not export GE crops or products containing GE materials to the United States or any other country.
- d) **Imports:** Tunisia allows importation of GE products for animal feed. Currently there is no biotechnology regulation and all imported commodities are handled in the same manner and subject to existing laws. There is no law that restricts, controls or authorizes trade of biotech products. Nevertheless, the Tunisian Ministry of Health published a study affirming that Tunisia's food supply was free of GE materials, while animal feed imported from countries producing GE products contained a high degree of GE material; primarily corn and soybean products. In 2015, Tunisia imported about 1.1 million metric tons (MT) of corn, 461.5 thousand MT of soybeans, 110.3 thousand MT of soybean meal, and 135.7 thousand MT of soybean oil from various sources. (see tables below)

Commodity	Corn	
	2015	
Country	Value (\$ million)	Volume (MT)
Ukraine	119.0	778,786
Brazil	21.0	124,935
Romania	16.2	94,316
Paraguay	7.4	55,954
United States-	7.2	38,189
Croatia	3.2	19,216
Russia	1.7	10,628
Argentina	0.8	2,599
Total	177	1.1 million

Source: GTA

Commodity	Soybean Oil	
	2015	
Country	Value (\$ million)	Volume (MT)
Russia	33.6	48,189
United States	17.9	23,457
Brazil	15.7	24,352
Spain	10.4	14,550
Netherlands	6.3	9,000
Canada	3.6	5,997
Greece	2.2	3,059
France	2.0	3,000
Paraguay	1.7	2,700
Argentina	0.9	1,400
Total	94.8	135,704

Commodity	Soybeans	
Country	2015	
	Value (\$million)	Volume (MT)
Brazil	61.1	161,150
United States	55.8	152,036
Paraguay	38.2	114,748
Ukraine	7.9	22,048
Argentina	4.1	11,500
Total	167.2	461,482

Commodity	Soybean Meal	
Country	2015	
	Value (\$million)	Volume (MT)
Argentina	32.2	90,050
United States	7.8	20,265
Total	40.0	110,315

Source: GTA

- e) Food Aid: Not applicable (Tunisia is neither recipient nor provider of food aid)
- f) Trade Barriers: Tunisia has no explicit barrier to trade of biotech products as there is currently no regulation that restricts, controls or authorizes trade of biotech products. Commodities are not segregated and both biotech and non-biotech products are handled the same way, with GE imported products subject to the same tariffs and barriers as conventional products. Consequently, U.S. origin shipments of grains and soybeans continue to enjoy unfettered access to the market. Tunisia imports a significant quantity of GE commodities for animal feed purposes.

PART B: Policy

- a) Regulatory Framework: Tunisia currently has no legislative or regulatory framework relevant to biotechnology, either for domestic production or imports of GE commodities. A draft biosafety law was put forward in 2010, but it was not adopted by the Parliament, and any further review has been postponed indefinitely. Reportedly this draft law included rules for dealing with confined use, deliberate release and commercialization of biotech products, as well as the import and transit of such products.

The Ministry of Agriculture, Water Resources and Fisheries and the Ministry of Environment and Local Affairs are the two government entities that would have direct oversight of agricultural biotechnology development, production or use in Tunisia. The Sanitary Control Agency (ANCSEP) under the Ministry of Health would be responsible for sanitary and environmental controls of imported goods.

Tunisia has adopted methodologies for GE risk assessment and management and created national laboratories for the monitoring and testing of GE materials; namely the National Gene Bank, the Technical Agro-Food Center, the Central Laboratory of Analysis and Trials, and the Seed Control Laboratory. To date, however, none of these risk assessments and management methodologies has been conducted.

Tunisia is a signatory of the Convention on Biological Diversity (May 1993) and ratified the Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety (June 2002). In 2014, Tunisia drafted a biosafety framework, with the support of the United Nation Environment Program (UNEP). Despite these efforts, the

regulations have still not been approved and the National Biosafety Committee, which would assist political and administrative decision making, has not yet been established.

The draft biosafety framework has an objective of identifying how to monitor and control GE products in a controlled environment, as well as managing the trade and transit of GE products in Tunisia. Recommendations from the Biosafety Committee would guide the laws and decrees to be drafted and voted on by Parliament. The draft law is founded on the precautionary principle and bases the control of GE products on a double authorization system. First, one would need a “prior authorization agreement,” granted by the Ministry of Environment, and then a second authorization from the Ministry directly related to the request, depending on the area of concern (i.e. Agriculture or Health).

- b) Approvals: Not applicable.
- c) Stacked or Pyramided Event Approvals: Not applicable.
- d) Field Testing: Tunisia has not yet developed a biotechnology framework or regulations for agricultural biotechnology, so there are no laws governing field trials. Any activity in agricultural biotechnology is confined to research.
- e) Innovative Biotechnologies: Tunisia has not yet determined the regulatory status of innovative biotechnologies in plants or plant products. There is no discussion of these technologies.
- f) Coexistence: Not applicable.
- g) Labeling: Tunisia’s Ministries of Trade and of Public Health published a joint order on September 3, 2008 (Art. 7) calling for mandatory labeling of all GE food ingredients and products. However, this law is not clear on what types of products are covered or the percentage of GE material that is allowed. There is also no clear understanding of which entity is responsible for enforcement.
- h) Monitoring and Testing: Tunisia does not test for GE traits. Several Tunisian laboratories seem to have the potential to conduct GE product testing and may do so once biotechnology regulations are in place. It is worth noting that Tunisia is receiving technical assistance from the European Commission’s Joint Research Center to build its biotechnology testing capacity.
- i) Low Level Presence (LLP) Policy: Not applicable.
- j) Additional Regulatory Requirements: Not applicable.
- k) Intellectual Property Right (IPR): Tunisia does not produce GE crops and currently does not have biotech regulations. Thus Tunisia’s IPR legislation does not address issues related to GE crops.
- l) Cartagena Protocol Ratification: Tunisia ratified the Cartagena Protocol in 2002.

- m) International Treaties/Fora: Tunisia is a signatory of the Convention on Biological Diversity (May 1993) and participates in international treaties and conventions such as the International Plant Protection Convention (IPPC) or the Codex Alimentarius (Codex), where issues concerning biotechnology are discussed. Tunisia does not take a position.
- n) Related Issues: Not applicable.

PART C: Marketing

- a) Public/Private Opinion: Tunisian policymakers and researchers are aware of biotechnology's potential to address such national food security challenges as crop diseases, weeds and cyclical drought. At the same time, policymakers are trying to balance the benefits of agricultural biotechnology to economic growth against conservation of natural resources and biodiversity. The Tunisian public and consumers continue to be largely unaware of the debate between proponents and opponents of biotechnology at the international level. Even so, there are occasional newspaper articles showcasing EU concerns about modern biotechnology. Notwithstanding this, a recent poll determined that only about four percent (4%) of Tunisians had ever heard of GE products.

Large-scale farmers in Tunisia would be interested in biotech crops as adoption would reduce their pesticide and irrigation costs and possibly improve yields and increase incomes. However, the attraction might not be the same for small-scale farmers (less than 20 hectares), who are the bulk of Tunisia's industry. The average farmer reserves seeds from one year's cereal crop for planting the next season. He also does not benefit from pesticide or herbicide treatments due to their high costs. The consensus is that these farmers would find the cost of GE seeds and inputs prohibitive and would only adopt them if subsidized by the government.

- b) Market Acceptance: There are no significant market acceptance issues related to the sale of biotech products in Tunisia due to the non-existence of GE food-use on one hand, and the absence of strong consumer movements pushing trade-restrictive agendas on the other hand. However, it is mandatory to inform consumers when GE methods of production are involved.
- c) Marketing Studies: Not applicable

CHAPTER 2: ANIMAL BIOTECHNOLOGY

Animal biotechnology is still at an early stage of understanding in Tunisia, except for basic reproductive biotechnologies such as artificial insemination. Embryo transfer, although technically feasible, has not yet gained a foothold in the livestock sector.

PART D: Production and Trade

- a) Product Development: No GE animals or cloning is under development in Tunisia.
- b) Commercial Production: Tunisia produces no GE livestock, clones or offsprings of clones.

- c) Exports: Not Applicable
- d) Imports: Not Applicable
- e) Trade Barriers: Not Applicable

PART E: Policy

- a) Regulatory Framework: No legal framework related to the development, commercial use, and/or import of GE animals or cloned animal product is in place.
- b) Innovative Biotechnologies: Not Applicable
- c) Labeling and traceability: Not Applicable
- d) Intellectual Property Rights (IPR): Not Applicable
- e) International Treaties/FORA: Tunisia is a member of Codex Alimentarius and the World Organization for Animal Health (OIE)
- f) Related Issues: Not Applicable

PART F: Marketing

- a) Public/Private Opinions: Not Applicable
- b) Market Acceptance/Studies: Not Applicable