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Report Highlights:

Farmers from the International Soybean Growers Alliance (ISGA), including two Brazilians, one Paraguayan, and two Americans, traveled to Paris to illustrate how their cultivation practices, including no-till, crop rotation, and biotech seeds, have contributed to an increased productivity, total production, and exports, while reducing environmental impacts. ISGA farmers expressed concerns about France's and the EU's slow approval process of new biotechnology products, while the diversity of biotech soybean varieties is expanding. Paris-based Brazilian, Paraguayan, and American Embassies presented a seminar at the Brazilian embassy titled, "Food Security and Biotechnology in the Americas and the EU: Today and the Future," and held separate meetings with the Government and the Parliament. The points made by the ISGA groups raised significant interest and numerous questions among the French, who expressed needs to follow up with the three embassies involved, and more specifically on the sustainability and socio-economic impacts of agricultural biotechnology.

General Information:

A delegation of the International Soybean Growers Alliance (ISGA) traveled to Europe on June 26-30, 2012, and met with a variety of contacts in Brussels, London, Berlin, and Paris. The group present in Paris included Mr. Carlos Favaro, Vice President, Aprosoja and Vice President, Aprosoja Mato Grosso (Brazil); Mr. Ricardo Tomczyk, Director, Aprosoja and Vice President, Aprosoja Mato Grosso (Brazil); Ms. Sonia Tomassone, Foreign Trade Advisor, CAPECO (Paraguay); Mr. Bob Metz, Director, United Soybean Board (United States); Mr. Ray Gaesser, Vice President, American Soybean Association (US); Mr. Brent Bab, Director Global Issues and Alliances, United Soy Export Council (US), and Mr. Benno van der Laan, consultant (US).

The collaboration of the Paris-based Brazilian, Paraguayan, and American Embassies resulted in a seminar at the Brazilian embassy titled, "Food Security and Biotechnology in the Americas and the EU: Today and the Future."

The seminar was introduced by Economic Counselor of the Brazilian embassy, and speakers included a representative of the French feed compounders industry, one speaker by nationality of the ISGA group. The seminar attracted an audience of 30 representatives of France's government, scientific researchers, agro-food industry, and agricultural media. In addition, the group had separate meetings with the Senate, the Ministry of Ecology, and the High Council on Biotechnology.

Food Security:

Only a few days after Rio+20, the main points raised during the ISGA visit mainly included food security and agricultural sustainability. The contribution of Brazilian, Paraguayan, and American soybean growers practices (combining no-till, crop rotation, and biotech seeds) to food security was presented by the spectacular increase in productivity, with two crops grown per season in Brazil and three in Paraguay, higher yields, and reduced production costs for farmers in the three countries relative to conventional soybean production. The significant increase in soybean production in the three countries boosted their exports. While a minor soybean producer in the 1980's, Paraguay has become the world's fourth largest supplier of soybeans, while Brazil has become the number one supplier to the European Union and France, and the United States remains the world's leading exporter of soybean products. All producers insisted on their commitment to feed the world growing population.

Sustainable Agriculture:

The ISGA delegation showed that the sharp increase in soybean production and exports, especially in South American countries, did not occur at the expense of the environment. They explained that good agricultural practices in soybean production resulted in significant water, diesel, carbon dioxide, and electricity savings, and reduced soil erosion. In addition, the good agricultural practices used by soybean growers were described as playing an important role in the conversion of pastures into productive land, without reducing the area covered by native vegetation. In all of the countries, the importance of crop rotation was stressed as the key management tool to prevent herbicide resistance in weeds when cultivating biotech herbicide-tolerant soybean varieties. Biodiversity protection was illustrated by the coexistence of biotech crop cultivation in Paraguay, which is also a leading supplier of organic sugar. In addition, the growing diversity of biotech soybean varieties was highlighted in all countries, even in the United States, where one single biotech soybean variety has been planted for many years.

The environmental benefits of biotech plant production are often questioned in France, and the Ministry of

Ecology and High Council of Biotechnology specifically asked the group and involved Embassies to document them. Interestingly, the French Association for Plant Biotechnology (AFBV), which members are plant biotechnology scientists, recently asked for similar information. FAS/Paris welcomed any documentation, studies, and surveys on this issue, that, in coordination with the other Embassies involved, can be forwarded to the French officials.

Trade Issues:

Member countries of the ISGA represent 90 percent of the world soybean exports, while the European Union (EU) is the second largest importer of soybean products after China. While the share of the EU among the major importers of soybean products is declining to the benefit of Asia, the EU and France remain net importers of soybean products as feed ingredients for their poultry and livestock herds. The representative of the French animal feed compounders indicated the European demand for non-biotech feed accounts for 15 percent of the total feed ingredient demand. In France, soybean meal is tested for biotech content at their port of entry, and the percentage is approximately 18 percent. The higher percentage for France than the EU average results from the fact that France is the largest compound feed producer for poultry in the EU, where the demand for non-biotech feed is the highest relative to livestock feed markets.

U.S. farmers explained that they are no longer waiting for all their export destinations, but only a majority, to approve new traits to cultivate them, and are therefore expanding the range of biotech soybean varieties grown. Their message was that they are no longer waiting for Europe to approve biotech traits to grown them. The Brazilian producers insisted on the fact that, while the varieties currently grown were created by Monsanto, their public research center Embrapa is currently working on creating other varieties specifically adapted to their natural conditions.

According to ISGA representatives, the diversification of biotech varieties adopted by farmers in the major soybean suppliers to the European Union is likely to lead to trade issues, as European authorities adopt new biotech traits at a slower path than that of their American counterparts. The ISGA regretted that EU authorizations decisions were not science-based but rather often driven by politics.

One of the contacts met by the ISGA group requested a list of the biotech events currently commercially grown in the ISGA member countries and not yet approved in the European Union and suggested to officially ask both the French and EU authorities the reasons for the delays in approval. FAS/Paris would be happy to coordinate with the other Embassies involved and send such list.

Socio-Economic and Ethical Aspects:

These are extremely important aspects of the use of biotechnology in agriculture for French authorities. In fact, the High Council on Biotechnology (HCB) has a unique structure that allows social, economic, and ethical aspects to be as important as scientific aspects to be taken into account when reviewing biotech dossiers. HCB therefore specifically recommended the ISGA to come back and meet with its socio-economic and ethics wing and specifically discuss these points, such as a farmer-to-farmer exchange to share experiences. In the meantime, FAS/Paris welcomes any information on these aspects that can be provided to HCB and French Ministry of Ecology, in coordination with the other Embassies involved.

The ministry of Ecology noted that it will be interesting to observe consumer reactions to the just implemented "biotech-free" labeling on food products, which was only used certain companies and are now generalized. He

further indicated that consumers hear essentially about the risks and rarely of the benefits on biotech crop production. He suggested that consumers may change attitude and see direct economic benefit for them to purchase biotech products if their prices are cheaper than the non-biotech-labeled products.

Conclusion:

This visited illustrated how efficient inter-Embassies collaboration can be to support and deliver a common message to French policy makers, industry and research. All French contacts met welcomed this international initiative and encouraged further collaboration for a greater impact. Requests made by French representatives included documentation on the environmental benefits as well as on the socio-economic impact of biotech plant production, by the Ministry of Ecology and the HCB. Suggestions made included to arrange a new visit to the HCB by an ISGA group and specifically addressing socio-economic aspects, and to send a list of the biotech soybean varieties grown in ISGA member countries but not authorized yet in the EU so that the Senator officially asks both the French and EU authorities the reasons for the delays in approval. FAS/Paris will further coordinate with counterparts in other Paris-based Embassies and soybean grower groups on these issues and will jointly work on addressing the requests and suggestions made from the French representatives met during these meetings.