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Summary of WTO Biotechnology Seminar

Report Categories:

Biotechnology - GE Plants and Animals

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Report Highlights:

The third annual Post-organized biotechnology seminar entitled “Biotechnology and Sustainable Agricultural Production” was held June 13, 2017 at the WTO. Speakers from Portugal, Senegal, and the United States discussed the role of biotechnology in working toward more sustainable agricultural production. Also addressed were land-use constraints and implication for management of biotechnology in Africa and how sustainable production that employs biotechnology can impact family farms. The audience consisted of country representatives to the WTO, other international organizations in Geneva, and private industry.

General Information:

The FAS organized and State-Department funded WTO biotech seminar was held on June 13 at the WTO. This was the third year of the event and again a diverse group of WTO member countries attended. Although attendance from African countries was disappointing, there was strong representation from Latin American countries along with some Asian and EU members. The theme for this year's event was Biotechnology and Sustainable Agricultural Production. The session was moderated by the Canadian Agricultural Counselor in Geneva (Garth Ehrhardt). Following a light lunch, the speakers gave concise and compelling presentations on the benefits to the environment and farmers from the use of biotechnology in agricultural. At the conclusion of the presentations there was a lengthy and lively question and answer period.

David Green from the U.S. Sustainability Alliance spoke on the role of biotechnology in working toward more sustainable agricultural production. David discussed how biotech soybeans have allowed for the growth in conservation tillage which saves labor costs, improves soil quality, enhances wildlife habitat, reduces fuel use, and decreases emissions. David presented studies that have quantified the environmental benefits from less water use and less land use in soybeans due to biotech varieties. He also explained the role of innovation in increasing production to meet population demands.

Samuel Timpo, Senior Program Officer with the African Biosafety Network of Expertise, discussed land-use constraints and implications for management of biotechnology in Africa. Samuel outlined some of the challenges facing African farmers today and noted that while there is much potential to increase production, actual productivity is very low. He further stated that the African Ministerial Conference on Science and Technology identified biotechnology as a key development tool. Samuel discussed the need to weigh the benefits and risks of any technology and noted the need to provide African decision makers with accurate and useful biotechnology and biosafety information. Mr. Timpo spoke about the challenge in Africa of adopting biotechnology but at the same time not undermining trade with Europe.

Cabriela Cruz, a Portuguese farmer, presented a European Farmer's perspective on how sustainable production that employs biotechnology can impact family farms. Gabriela described the many challenges of farming in eastern Portugal including poor soil quality and unpredictable precipitation. She discussed the dilemma of EU expectations that farmers produce sustainably but yet not being allowed to use the latest technologies to obtain profitability. The Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) reform places more demand on farmers to protect the environment yet the EU limits use of biotechnology which is needed to reduce tillage and the use of water, and cut down on pesticide applications. Gabriela emphasized the extreme pest problems she faces and the benefits that could be derived from using stacked biotech corn varieties.

Following the presentations there was a lively question and answer period as the speakers fielded several pointed questions from the audience. In particular, a representative from the EU Mission challenged the characterization of the EU commission as anti-biotech. He emphasized that it was the member-states that were slowing the process and that the EU Commission is neutral or even pro-biotech. However, speakers pushed back by noting some of the negative statements made by EU commission officials. Mrs. Cruz observed that policy decisions by the EU impacted the profitability of her farm.

Overall the program was very well received and attendees appreciated the lively discussion and receiving the presentations.



From Right to left: Garth Thorburn (Minister Counselor), Gabriela Cruz (presenter), Samuel Timpo (presenter), David Green (presenter), Garth Ehrhardt (moderator), and Oliver Flake (Attaché)