



**SOUTH ASIA**  
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# NEWSLETTER

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## SABP

The South Asia Biosafety Program (SABP) is an international developmental program initiated with support from the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). The program is implemented in India and Bangladesh and aims to work with the local governments to facilitate implementation of transparent, efficient and responsive regulatory frameworks that ensure the safety of new foods and feeds, and protect the environment.

Over the next three years, SABP will work with its in-country partners to:

- Identify and respond to technical training needs for food, feed and environmental safety assessment.
- Develop a sustainable network of trained, authoritative local experts to communicate both the benefits and the concerns associated with new agricultural biotechnologies to farmers and other stakeholder groups.
- Raise the profile of biotechnology and biosafety on the policy agenda within India and address policy issues within the overall context of economic development, international trade, environmental safety and sustainability.

## CONFERENCE ON FOODS DERIVED FROM GM CROPS: ISSUES FOR CONSUMERS, REGULATORS AND SCIENTISTS

Dr. Vibha Ahuja, Deputy General Manager, Biotechnology Consortium India Ltd. & Dr. Geeta Jotwani, Senior Research Officer, Indian Council of Medical Research

Under the auspices of South Asia Biosafety Programme (SABP), the Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR), AGBIOS Inc. and Biotech Consortium India Limited (BCIL) jointly organized an "International Conference on Foods derived from GM Crops: Issues for Consumers, Regulators and Scientists" on September 26 and 27, 2005 at The Metropolitan Hotel Nikko, New Delhi, India. The conference was well received and provided an excellent platform for the exchange of views among various stakeholders. This conference was very timely as several food crops are under field trials in India and the regulatory reforms are in progress particularly with the introduction of the Food Safety Bill, 2005 (under consideration of Parliament). For the first time the agencies responsible for food control system also participated very actively along with other stakeholders and were exposed to various issues with respect to GM foods. The two-day conference was a great success as for the first time the focus was on the issues related to food derived from GM crops instead of only agriculture.

Senior functionaries from all the concerned Ministries and departments viz. Ministry of Health and Family Welfare (MoHFW), Ministry of Environment & Forests (MoEF), Ministry of Food Processing Industries (MFPI) and Department of

Biotechnology (DBT), and Department of Women and Child Development informed about their activities and views about the subject in the inaugural session as well as during the course of technical sessions.

The conference was attended by 150 participants representing a cross section of stakeholders including regulators, policy makers and other concern government departments, scientists, industry and NGOs from India and Bangladesh.

The first day of the conference had two technical sessions viz. the regulations and key elements in the safety assessment of GM foods. A global snapshot of various regulations for GM foods was presented by Dr. Morven A. McLean of AGBIOS Inc. Canada. Dr. T.V. Ramanaiah of DBT and Dr. S.R. Gupta of the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare gave an overview of Indian regulatory framework under Environment (Protection) Act, 1986 and Prevention of Food Adulteration (PFA) Act, 1954. Mr. Patrick Deboyser, Minister-Counsellor (Health and Food Safety), European Commission apprised the participants about the work of the Codex ad hoc intergovernmental task force on foods derived from biotechnology. Eminent experts from the USA, Canada, The Netherlands and India elaborated on toxicity, allergenicity and nutritional assessment of GM foods.

Day two of the conference focused on issues related to public participation and consumer issues. Topics including studies on understanding consumer acceptance in Asia, views of NGOs with respect to decision making processes and feasibility of consumer labeling etc. were intensively debated. Case studies from the USA and Australia were presented on post commercial monitoring of GM foods and public consultation.

Intense and at times animated discussions between speakers and participants on a range of issues related to different themes of the technical sessions were a clear indication of the growing awareness about GM foods among all concerned.

ICMR is the technical advisory body to the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, which is the nodal Ministry responsible for ensuring quality and safety of food. It is also designated as the nodal Ministry with the Codex Alimentarius Commission. MoHFW and ICMR are in the process of preparing guidelines and policy documents on safety assessment, nutritional enhancement, labeling, public awareness, ethical issues etc. and the sharing of international and national experiences at the conference will be extremely useful in articulating these documents.

Most importantly the conference discussions brought out the need for intensive public awareness and capacity building activities for the various stakeholders. It was strongly recommended that public awareness needs to be created to help in taking informed decisions at this critical juncture before the introduction of GM foods in India. While appreciating the initiative taken by ICMR, AGBIOS and BCIL under SABP, participants unanimously recommended that there is an urgent need to have more such events at both national and regional levels so as to reach the concerned stakeholders.

(See photo on page 2)

## MAHARASHTRA TRAIN-THE-TRAINERS WORKSHOP

The South Asia Biosafety Program (SABP), in collaboration with the Maharashtra State Agricultural Marketing Board (MSAMB), Pune and the Science Ashram (TSA), Gujarat organized a workshop on agri-biotechnology for extension workers from Maharashtra. The workshop was held on September 20, 2005, in Pune, Maharashtra as a part of a series of SABP-organized, awareness-building workshops being delivered in different Indian states.

Sixty-three participants representing 11 districts of Maharashtra attended the workshop. The workshop attracted participation from government extension workers, state agricultural department personnel, non-governmental organization representatives, private company representatives, farm cooperatives personnel and progressive farmers. The language of the workshop was Marathi.

During the workshop, participants interacted with experts on the role of biotechnology in agricultural development. Presentations were made by Dr. N.G. Hegde, President, BAIF Development Research Foundation; Dr. R.R. Mohite, Project Advisor, Maharashtra State Agricultural Marketing Board, Pune; Dr. C. Chaporkar, General Manager and Head, Cotton Research, Mahyco; Dr. Rajani Nadgauda, Head, Tissue Culture Division, National Chemical Laboratory, Pune and a delegate who shared his experience and concerns with biotechnology. Experts explained concepts on agri-biotechnology and genetic engineering and participants shared their experiences related to biotechnology and questions faced by them in the field from farmers during the interaction sessions.

Following the presentations the delegates, working in small groups, discussed the topics and pinpointed questions that arose from each of their sectors. Their questions focused on the use of GM crops in organic programmes; what the possible measures to curb the sale of illegal Bt seeds could be; the possibility of reducing seed dependency associated with GM crops; the probable role of biotechnology in controlling sucking pest; how biotechnological tools could be helpful in conserving biodiversity; what new GM crops are likely to be available for commercial



Working group during Maharashtra Train-the-Trainers workshop.

CALENDAR OF EVENTS (INDIA)		
Event	Date	Place
Theoretical and Practical Course: "Transgenic Crops: Production, Evaluation and Applications", ICGEB, New Delhi	November 7 to 18, 2005	New Delhi
Annual Conference of the Nutrition Society of India	November 18-19, 2005	Hyderabad
Workshop: "Protein Interaction Technologies in Biomedical Research", ICGEB, New Delhi	November 21-December 2, 2005	New Delhi

cultivation in the near future in India; and whether Bt crops can be a part of insect pest management.

An expert panel comprising the presenters, M.K. Sharma, MD, Mahyco Monsanto Biotech (I) Ltd. and Country Coordinator, SABP-India, Purvi Mehta Bhatt, joined the panel and addressed these questions. An easy-to-use, spiral bound training manual in Marathi, covering frequently asked questions about GM crops, biotechnology and biosafety along with two wall posters on aspects of GM crop development, use and biosafety were distributed to all the participants for disseminating the information to farmers.



Speakers at the inaugural session of the International Conference on Foods Derived from GM Crops: Issues for Consumers, Regulators and Scientists held September 26 and 27, 2005, at The Metropolitan Hotel Nikko, New Delhi.

**For copies of the presentations given at the conference Foods Derived from Genetically Modified Crops: Issues for Consumers, Regulators and Scientists, please see:**

**[http://www.agbios.com/sabp\\_main.php?action=ActivitiesPage](http://www.agbios.com/sabp_main.php?action=ActivitiesPage)**

CALENDAR OF EVENTS (BANGLADESH)

Event	Date	Place
International Botanical Conference	December 9-11, 2005	Botany Department, Dhaka University
Regional workshop on Awareness Building on the Recent Advances in Agricultural Biotechnology and Biosafety: To be organized by SABP.	January/February, 2006	Chittagong and Khulna

**BIOTECH COMMUNICATION: POTENTIAL ROLE OF JOURNALISTS ROUND TABLE MEETING**

A round table meeting on the potential role of journalists in biotech communication, organized by the Bangladesh Biotechnology Information Center (BdBIC) of ISAAA, was held on September 30, 2005, at the Best Western La Vinci Hotel, Dhaka. About 50 journalists including three eminent editors, representing both print and electronic media, participated.

Papers were presented by Prof. Lutful Hassan of Bangladesh Agricultural University, Dr. Donald J. MacKenzie, Executive Vice President of AGBIOS, Mr. Mostafa Kamal Majumder, Editor of the Daily New Nation, Mr. Ijaz Ahmad Rao of Pakistan and Prof. K.M. Nasiruddin, followed by a question and answer session with the journalists.



Speakers at the ISAAA Media workshop (from left), Ms. Parveen Ahmed, Rapporteur, Associated Press; Mr. Mostafa Kamal Mojumder, Editor, The Daily New Nation; Mr. Kazi Shiraj, Editor, Dainik Dinkal; Dr. Donald J. MacKenzie, Executive Vice President, AGBIOS; Mr. Ijaz Ahmad Rao (freelance biotech communicator, Pakistan).

The journalists' questions focused on the safety issues of biotech crops. The speakers explained that in the past ten years different biotech crops/products have been consumed as food and feed and, contrary to the claims of anti-biotech activists, there is no proven record of their negative effects.

One of the editors proposed forming a Biotech Journalists Association, similar to the Environmental Journalists Association, to better position them in writing about the usefulness of biotech crops for human welfare.



Participants at the Conference on Foods Derived from GM Crops held in New Delhi, India.

**BANGLADESHI SCIENTISTS AND POLICY MAKERS ATTEND DELHI CONFERENCE**

South Asia Biosafety Program (SABP) supported the participation of five biotech scientists, policy makers and private sector representatives at the Conference on Foods Derived from GM Crops: Issues for Consumers, Regulators and Scientists held in New Delhi on September 26 and 27, 2005.

The participants included:

- Mr. Mihir Kanti Majumder, Joint Secretary, Ministry of Environment and Forests, Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh.
- Prof. Dr. Lutful Hassan, Department of Genetics and Plant Breeding, Bangladesh Agricultural University, Mymensingh.
- Mr. S.M. Shahidullah Noor, Director (in-charge), Bangladesh Standard and Testing Institution.
- Dr. Md. Shamsheer Ali, Head, Biotechnology Division, Bangladesh Rice Research Institute (BRRI).
- Mr. A.Z.M. Khorshed Alam Chowdhury, Senior Breeder, East West Seeds (Bangladesh) Ltd.

Prof. M. Imdadul Hoque, Bangladesh Country Coordinator for SABP, accompanied the group.

**AG-BIOTECH STAKEHOLDERS MEETING**

A meeting of senior-level policy makers from national research institutes, Ministries and the private sector, organized by SABP, was held under the chairmanship of Dr. M. Nurul Alam, Executive Chairman of BARC, on September 30, 2005.

About 20 participants from Bangladesh Agricultural Research Council (BARC), Bangladesh Agricultural Research Institute (BARI), Bangladesh Rice Research Institute (BRRI), the Department of Agricultural Extension (DAE), the Cotton Development Board, the Deputy Director (Research) of the Ministry of Agriculture, the Project Director of the National Biosafety Framework (NBF) Project, and a representative from East West Seeds attended.

Participants, who expressed their appreciation for the efforts of SABP over the past year, highlighted the need for strengthening agricultural biotechnology in the country and gave guidelines for the coming years.

## ICMR CALLS FOR MANDATORY LABELLING OF GM FOODS

The Financial Express - September 27, 2005

The Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR) has called for mandatory labelling of genetically modified (GM) foods. It said that imported foods containing traces of genetically modified organisms (GMOs) should be tested for their safety in the labs in the country.

The report prepared under the leadership of ICMR director-general NK Ganguly has been submitted to the government. The recommendations of the report are being reviewed by the Central Committee on Food Safety (CCFS) for incorporation under the Prevention of Food Adulteration (PFA) Act and Rules.

The ICMR report focuses on issues of labelling, nutrition value, food safety and ethical values.

At present PFA Act and Rules does not have any provisions to deal with GM foods. The new Food Safety and Standards Bill, 2005 tabled in Parliament has mentioned the need for regulating GM foods.

## DEAL TO SHARE GM PAPAYA BENEFITS LIKELY

Bangkok Post - September 27, 2005

The Agriculture Department will not hesitate to sign the planned benefit-sharing agreement over the co-invention of the genetically modified papaya and related inventions with a US foundation. Sophida Hemakhom, the department's legal affairs officer, said the department had considered this thoroughly and viewed that the agreement would have no negative impacts on the country.

The department plans to sign a memorandum of understanding to share benefits in GM papaya and other related inventions with the Cornell Research Foundation, with which Thai researchers co-developed the papaya years ago.

The foundation has applied for patents to cover the method of growing the virus-resistant papaya as well as the discovery of the ringspot virus genes.

But experts said the virus are almost naturally common, and therefore should not be patented.

See the full article at: [http://agbios.com/sabp\\_main.php?action=ShowNewsItem&id=6870](http://agbios.com/sabp_main.php?action=ShowNewsItem&id=6870)

## GM CROP THAT HOLDS ON TO ITS SEEDS OFFERS HIGHER YIELDS

SciDev.Net - August 30, 2005

Researchers have found a way of boosting the yield of a major crop by stopping its seedpods from bursting open.

Indian mustard (*Brassica juncea*) is the most important oilseed crop in India after groundnut. It is grown largely to produce cooking oil from the seeds. However, because the seedpods open naturally to disperse their seeds at different times, part of each harvest is lost.

This 'pod shatter' also makes it difficult for farmers to rotate crops because prematurely released seeds can germinate and become weeds.

Researchers, led by Lars Østergaard from the University of California at San Diego, United States, created genetically modified (GM) Indian mustard whose seedpods will not open naturally. They did this by inserting a gene from a related plant called Arabidopsis.

Their research was published online by Plant Biotechnology Journal on 16 August

See the full article at: [http://agbios.com/sabp\\_main.php?action=ShowNewsItem&id=6790](http://agbios.com/sabp_main.php?action=ShowNewsItem&id=6790)

## HOMESPUN Bt HERE AT LAST

Indian Express - September 30, 2005

After facing criticism for years of failure in developing its own Bt cotton, the Central Institute for Cotton Research (CICR) now has something concrete to claim. It has been able to introduce the Cry1 Ac gene in an Indian cotton variety and, if all goes well, the institute's Bt will hit the market in another two years.

Director B.M. Khadi is confident the breed will be a success. "The CICR Bt will be an independent variety, which the farmers won't have to buy every year from the market like the Bt hybrids available currently.

"Moreover, it will be much, much cheaper than those now available," he said.

CICR has been trying to develop India's own Bt since the early 1990s.

"At long last, we have standardised our own protocol (method) for a primary transgenic variety. We call it meristem culture. Using this method, we have put the Cry1 Ac Bt gene in the famous Rajasthan variety, Bikaner Narma, and are currently testing it under different environmental conditions across the country. The results are very encouraging and there is little doubt that we'll be able to introduce our Bt in the market in two years," Khadi, who lead the research team at the University of Agricultural Sciences, Dharwad, said.

See the full article at: [http://agbios.com/sabp\\_main.php?action=ShowNewsItem&id=6891](http://agbios.com/sabp_main.php?action=ShowNewsItem&id=6891)

## PLEA TO POPULARIZE SCIENCE NEWS

The New Nation - September 30, 2005

Speakers yesterday at a roundtable stressed the need for lucid presentation of science-based news to popularise discoveries and potentials of the biotechnology in order to ensure faster development of Bangladesh at cheaper cost in agricultural, industrial and health sectors.

See the full article at: [http://agbios.com/sabp\\_main.php?action=ShowNewsItem&id=6895](http://agbios.com/sabp_main.php?action=ShowNewsItem&id=6895)

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