



Africa 'resistant to GMOs because of relationship with EU'

Europe's cautious approach to genetically modified crops is having a negative effect on agriculture in Africa, according to a group of farmers.

A delegation of African farmers met with EU policymakers this week in Brussels to discuss the role of biotechnology in tackling the food crisis.

Their meetings come amid concern over how climate change, drought and population increases will impact Africa's ability to feed its population.

Mottlatsi Everest Musi, a small-scale maize farmer in South Africa, has been cultivating genetically modified Bt-maize since 2005.

He told reporters at a EuropaBio event on Wednesday that growing the technology had boosted his profits and enabled him to expand his business.

Musi said he had come to Brussels "to share my experience and to send a message to Europeans that Africa seems to be reluctant to grow genetically modified seeds because they don't want to lose their relationship with Europe".

"They doubt whether GM technology is safe because Europe has developed this 'go-slow' approach and that is impacting negatively on the continent," he said.

Musi, who acquired 21 hectares of land through South Africa's land redistribution for agricultural development programme in 2004, said his yield had increased by 34 per cent after switching to Bt-maize.

However, he raised concerns that the number of countries growing GM grains was decreasing because Africa did not want to jeopardise its friendship with Europe.

He also suggested that technology, such as a drought tolerant seed, could help cope with desertification in Kenya and reduce the need for food aid.

"Europe must come clean and tell the world that maybe all they want is for Africa to remain impoverished and dependent on handouts," he said.

The executive director of the African agricultural technology foundation (AATF), Daniel Fungai Mataruka, agreed that the perception of GM in Africa was influenced by the EU.

He said, "Public opinion in Africa has tended to be shaped by European public opinion partly because the NGOs which are anti-GMO and operating in Europe are for the most part exactly the same NGOs who come to Africa and spread exactly the same message.

"That is really where public opinion is being formed - by vocal and aggressive anti-GM groups. From a scientific perspective we have not found any scientific evidence of any harmful effects. I'm not sure where these groups are getting their information from."

The group met with several MEPs, including ECR member Struan Stevenson and Spanish EPP deputy Christina Gutiérrez-Cortines earlier in the week.

They had some "pretty congenial" meetings with the parliamentarians this week, said Mataruka, adding, "They seemed to be very supportive of the technology and would want to see this technology being adopted in Europe.

"It would appear that this problem is not a scientific problem - it is a political problem. Their constituents do not seem to want GM crops to be cultivated in Europe - not for scientific reasons really."

Mataruka said his organisation aimed to access technology which could solve problems faced by small-scale farmers in sub-Saharan Africa.

There were many problems surrounding pests, diseases and drought in sub-Saharan Africa, he said, with resource-poor farmers unable to afford pesticides or without irrigation facilities.

"If we can provide protection then we can address the problem without them investing money they do not have to tackle those specific problems," he said.

While agricultural productivity in sub-Saharan Africa "has effectively remained stagnant" for the past 30-40 years, he said that countries like India, China, South Africa and Egypt were seeing a 30 per cent increase in yields as a result of using GM.

"It is our objective to ensure that we can change the lives of the farmers in sub-Saharan Africa by also giving them this technology," he said.

Francois Traore', the president of the cotton association of Burkina Faso, said the biggest problem associated with cotton in his country was that it was "very demanding" in terms of pest control and required lots of pesticides.

In an average year, traditional pest control in cotton required about six sprays, but this could be reduced to two with the use of GM cotton, he said.