



AFRICAN AGRICULTURAL TECHNOLOGY FOUNDATION
FONDATION AFRICAINE POUR LES TECHNOLOGIES AGRICOLES

PRESS RELEASE

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AATF Marks Second Anniversary Since Formation of WEMA Project

NAIROBI: 19 March 2010 – Significant progress made to bring higher yielding drought-tolerant maize to smallholder farmers in Africa

The Water Efficient Maize for Africa (WEMA) project today marked the two-year anniversary since its formation. The objective of the project partnership, also known as WEMA, is to develop and make available drought-tolerant maize varieties royalty free to smallholder farmers in Sub-Saharan Africa.

Formed in March 2008, WEMA is a multi-year, public-private partnership with a goal of helping smallholder farmers and their families in Sub-Saharan Africa mitigate the risk of drought on maize production and thus increase food security. Maize is the most widely grown staple crop in Africa and it is estimated that more than half of the African population depend on this grain as their main food source. The project seeks to use advanced plant breeding and biotechnology to develop more drought-tolerant maize varieties.

The partnership is coordinated by the African Agricultural Technology Foundation (AATF), a not-for-profit organization focused on the delivery of appropriate agricultural technologies for use by resource-poor smallholder farmers in Sub-Saharan Africa. AATF has been working alongside the non-profit International Maize and Wheat Improvement Center (CIMMYT); the private agricultural company, Monsanto; and the national agricultural research systems in the participating countries of Kenya, Mozambique, South Africa, Tanzania and Uganda. The partnership is funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates and Howard G. Buffett Foundations.

The partners expect the combination of advanced breeding and biotechnology to increase grain yields on a more consistent basis during drought. It is estimated that the maize products developed over the next decade could increase yields as much as 20 to 35 percent under moderate drought conditions compared to current varieties. This double-digit increase would translate into an estimated two million additional tons of food during drought years in the participating countries meaning 14 to 21 million people would have more to eat and sell. The benefits and safety of these maize varieties will be assessed by national authorities according to the regulatory requirements in each of the five countries.

“Farming in any area of the world has risks, but it is certainly a more risky enterprise in Sub-Saharan Africa,” said Dr. Daniel Mataruka, executive director, AATF. “Access to seeds that can perform well during moderate drought stress is a strong step towards helping to reduce some of the risk of crop failure and will help break the cycle of food insecurity for farmers and their families. We anticipate this will become increasingly important in the face of climate change.”

24 Months of Progress and Counting

Over the past two years, a team of more than 60 scientists from across the partner organizations have worked together building the necessary scientific testing, regulatory procedures and protocols for the proper evaluation of the maize in this project within each of the five countries.

“Our participation in this project especially the development of confined field trial sites and in the trials have additional benefits for our country, which includes building our capacity to improve other important regional crops” said Dr. Alois Kullaya, WEMA country coordinator, Tanzania.

The Agricultural Research Council, based in South Africa, planted its first WEMA transgenic trial in November 2009 at Lutzville, a testing site developed in North Cape South Africa, to screen for drought-tolerance performance under both optimum and low soil nitrogen, a condition commonly faced by many African farmers. This screening will gather data to be used to help identify hybrids that will continue to yield in the face of drought stress and low soil nitrogen levels.

The breeding initiatives by CIMMYT and Monsanto using conventional breeding and state of the art molecular marker technology are also making a contribution towards the development of hybrid maize varieties that can achieve high yields under water stress.

Dr. Godfrey Asea, a maize breeder and the WEMA-Uganda country coordinator at the National Agricultural Research Organisation adds, “we are eager to move forward and start to use some of the products especially conventional drought-tolerant maize lines to develop an array of varieties in the country.”

In the next 12 months, pending necessary regulatory approvals, it is expected scientists will be able to proceed with the planting of biotech trials in Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda. Mozambique will take steps towards completing the development of testing sites and secure regulatory approvals with a goal of planting in 2011.

The African Agricultural Technology Foundation (AATF) is a not-for-profit organisation that facilitates and promotes public/private partnerships for the access and delivery of appropriate proprietary agricultural technologies for use by resource-poor smallholder farmers in Sub-Saharan Africa (www.aatf-africa.org).
