

Seed companies exude confidence, ready to commercialise TELA maize



Peter Ndungu, research and development manager at Gicheha Farm, centre, with other participants during the NPT site visit at Kibos, Kisumu

For Peter Mutisya, the Managing Director of PealAgro Services Enterprises Ltd, meeting future food demand will require quick growth in the agriculture sector by embracing modern technologies that have been proven to boost farm productivity. “Any genuine business must adapt to advances of modern-day technologies in the world, and agricultural biotechnology is one such technologies,” he quips. Agricultural biotechnology continues to change the lives of farmers across Africa by delivering to them a wide range of innovations that have been proven to improve agricultural productivity. Mutisya is optimistic that biotech research currently underway in the country will deliver better performing varieties that will add value to farmers.

As one of the entrepreneurs in the seed sector in the country, he is looking forward to the approval of the TELA Bt maize for registration and commercial release for use by farmers.

“Seed companies want a product that will give farmers better results,” he says.

Just like Mutisya, Peter Ndungu, research and development manager at Gicheha Farm in Nairobi, is looking forward to the results from the National Performance Trials (NPT) for Bt maize to allow seed players move ahead and get the product to farmers.

“I am convinced on the science. What we are interested in is better performing products than what is currently available in the market that will help improve the livelihood of farmers,” says Ndungu.

He adds that as a player in the seed industry, his seed company is ready to embrace the new variety and develop their own capacity to produce the seeds for farmers if there is sense of business in it.

“Although it primarily targets the stemborer pest, TELA® Maize has shown partial but significant resistance to the devastating Fall Armyworm, and this is a plus for the seed industry,” he points out.

Mutisya and Ndungu are among participants from seed companies who visited the Bt maize NPT site in Kisumu that was set up by the Kenya Plant Health Inspectorate Service (KEPHIS) to validate the performance of the varieties.

The seeing is believing site visit was organised by AATF, Kenya Agricultural and Livestock Research Organisation (KALRO) and other partners in the TELA project to allow seed companies to assess the performance of the TELA Bt maize against other conventional and commercial crop varieties.

The visit also provided opportunity for the seed players to identify suitable varieties that will be availed to farmers affected by stemborers and Fall Armyworm.

The TELA Maize Project is working towards delivering drought-tolerant and insect-protected maize varieties to enhance maize production among smallholder farmers in the region.

This means that after successful NPT process, the TELA® Bt maize will be available for planting by farmers to mitigate effects of climate change especially moderate drought and losses to insects such as stemborers and Fall Armyworm.

So far, TELA Maize has shown partial control of Fall Armyworm compared to maize varieties that most farmers currently grow.

According to Dr. James Karanja, the principle investigator of the project, stemborers are known to reduce maize production in several countries in Africa.

“In Kenya, stemborers can reduce maize production by an average of 13 per cent or 400,000 tonnes of maize, equivalent to the normal yearly amount of maize imported by Kenya,” he says, adding that this damage is valued at more than \$90 million.

Dr. Karanja says six sites spread across the country are currently undergoing NPT for Bt. maize to evaluate performance in different agroecological zones.

He said after the trials are complete, the next phase shall be obtaining clearance from KEPHIS to allow seed companies to produce seeds for farmers.

“All TELA maize varieties will be made available to smallholder farmers through local seed companies and the companies will not be required to pay royalties for the maize varieties, thus making them more affordable for farmers,” he explained.

Now, it is just a matter of time before Mutisya, Ndungu and other seed companies in Kenya can receive license rights, to produce and commercialize the new TELA maize under their private brand.

Licensed seed companies will access the technology royalty-free for them to produce and sell the seed under their brands to farmers. The better yield performance of TELA hybrids, together with improved seed quality will deliver more value to farmers and create more demand and profit potential for the seed brand.