

PRESS RELEASE

Biotech crops can save Africa's food shortage

Good-will and support from African governments needed to expedite approval process for commercialization



[Nairobi, September 10, 2020]: Biotech crops can effectively contribute to addressing food security and mitigating climate change challenges in Africa, a conference was told.

The conference heard that frequent drought events due to climate change, infestation of new pests like fall armyworm, use and misuse of harmful pesticides and low productivity due to low soil nutrients and recycling of old seed varieties, have resulted to recurrent food insecurity in Africa. Biotech crops, on the other hand, are reversing this trend.

Speaking at the Media for Environment, Science, Health and Agriculture (MESHA's) Fourth African Conference of Science Journalists, Dr. Sylvester Oikeh, TELA Project Manager at AATF said the Project is working towards getting transgenic drought-tolerant and insect-protected maize varieties to farmers to enhance food security in Sub-Saharan Africa.

Dr. Oikeh spoke on the *Status on development and commercialization of transgenic TELA maize for African farmers* in a virtual conference that brought together nearly 200 science journalists from 30 African countries and beyond to discuss conservation, climate change, agriculture, and health to bolster factual reporting on science.

“When farmers have access to the TELA maize varieties they will be able to mitigate effects of climate change especially moderate drought and losses to insects such as stem borers and fall armyworm,” said Dr. Oikeh.

Dr. Oikeh noted that TELA Bt maize hybrid varieties were released to smallholder farmers in South Africa in 2016 and has been granted environmental release to proceed to national performance trials in Kenya. National performance trials are carried out in Kenya by the Kenya Plant Health and Inspectorate Service (KEPHIS) to determine the agronomic potential and adaptability of new varieties relative to those currently in the market.

“Bt maize gave positive and significant effect on yield across varieties and trials with 52 per cent yield advantage over non-Bt maize in Kenya and Uganda,” said Dr. Oikeh, noting that full adoption of Bt maize in Kenya could save the country a whopping 400,000 tonnes equivalent to US 90 million that is lost to stemborer damage annually.

Bt (*Bacillus thuringiensis*) is a microbe naturally found in soil and that has been used as a biological pesticide for several decades to control insect damage mostly in the horticulture industry. Usually used as a spray, scientists found a way to incorporate Bt proteins (genes) into the plant to give the plant protection against certain insect pests such as stem borer and fall armyworm without spraying the plant.

While responding to a question on safety concerns on the technology, Dr. Oikeh reaffirmed the safety of biotech products, noting that farmers from other regions across the world are enjoying the benefits of the technology.

“Several global authorities including World Health Organization (WHO); Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO); European Food Safety Authority (EFSA) and many Academies of Sciences have all indicated the GM food that have been evaluated and passed through regulatory scrutiny and approved are safe to eat,” he emphasized.

In Africa, nine countries including Kenya, Malawi, South Africa, Nigeria and Sudan have approved and released transgenic cotton, cowpea, maize and soybean. Globally, 67 countries are either growing or trading with biotech crops.

The TELA Maize Project is working with governments in seven African countries including Ethiopia, Kenya, Mozambique, Nigeria, South Africa, Tanzania, and Uganda - to deliver the new TELA maize varieties to farmers. All TELA maize varieties will be



made available to smallholder farmers through local seed companies after assessment by national authorities according to the country's regulatory requirements.

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About AATF (www.aatf-africa.org)

Founded in 2003 to address Africa's food security prospects through agricultural technology, AATF believes that the agricultural sector is a key foundational pillar as Africa consolidates its economic growth and carves out its new position as a major global economic powerhouse and the next growth market in the world. It was formed in response to the need for an effective mechanism that would facilitate and support negotiation for technology access and delivery and formation of appropriate partnerships to manage the development & deployment of innovative technologies for use by smallholder farmers in SSA:

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