

News release



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GM cotton to invade West Africa

Cotonou, Benin, 2 Feb 2004

The world's biggest agrochemical companies and the US government are rushing to introduce genetically modified (GM) crops into West Africa, starting with cotton.

A new report [1] from GRAIN [2] shows that Monsanto, Syngenta and Dow AgroSciences, supported by USAID, are finalising plans with the Malian government to convert the West African country's cotton crop to transgenic varieties over the next five years. Cotton is Mali's number one export. Yet local farmers and the general public are in the dark about this.

"Bt cotton is the biotech industry's trojan horse for bringing patented GM crops into West Africa," says Jeanne Zoundjihékpon of GRAIN in Benin. "The infrastructure for cotton is well established and they want to take advantage of this. But cotton is a critical crop for the region. It is shameful for public researchers to play with the livelihoods of their people, when the technologies they are bringing in offer nothing to farmers but greater dependence on foreign companies."

In 2003, before the country adopted any biosafety law, Burkina Faso imported two varieties of Bt cotton from the US, one from Monsanto and the other from Syngenta. Field trials are now underway at research stations of the Institut Nationale de l'Environnement et de la Recherche Agronomique in Farakoba and Kouaré.

The same haste is now gripping Mali. Researchers with the Institut d'Economie Rurale are finalising a five-year project with USAID, Monsanto, Syngenta and Dow Agrosiences to develop and commercialise transgenic cotton. Under the terms of the draft agreement², field tests of imported transgenic Bt cotton will begin in 2004. The plan is being negotiated without consultation with Malian cotton farmers, those most at risk from the impending conversion to GM technology.

"Just two weeks ago the Expert Group of the African Union's Scientific, Technical and Research Commission expressly recommended the need for its member states to consider a moratorium on GMO introduction," says Mariam Mayet of the African Centre for Biosafety in South Africa. "But GM continues to be pushed into Africa through the back door, putting the whole continent at risk. African governments need to address this at the upcoming meeting of the Parties to the Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia."

In a collaborative study of the implications of Bt cotton for West Africa, GRAIN found that this is a totally inappropriate technology for the region's farmers. Contrary to what its proponents claim, Bt cotton is not likely to reduce pesticide use and will not provide any economic advantages to farmers. Local cotton farmers, scientists and NGOs consulted for the study say it would be far more effective for public institutions to focus on supporting pesticide reduction programmes that have already proven successful and that do not depend on foreign technologies, such as the targeted application, threshold application or integrated pest and production management programmes. While these approaches reduce pesticide use by 70-100%, they are practiced on less than 10% of the cotton area of Mali. The limitations are not technical but financial, as the budgets for these programmes continue to be cut. Meanwhile, the US government is promising millions of dollars to Mali if it chooses GE technology instead.

In the West African context there is simply no way to guarantee that transgenic cotton, once it is introduced, will not contaminate the conventional cotton supply. Already West African cotton farmers can't compete against the heavily subsidised producers in the US. The switch to GE will only make things worse.

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CONTACTS

Jeanne Zoundjihékpon – (GRAIN) 06 BP 2083 - Cotonou – BENIN, Tel: 229 33 79 50, Fax: 229 33 79 15, E-mail: jeanne@grain.org.
(Language: French)

Robert Ali Brac de la Perrière – (BEDE) in Kayes, Mali: Tel/Fax GRDR: 223 252 29 82
(Languages: French or English)

Mariam Mayet – (Head of African Centre for Biosafety, 13 The Braids Road, Emmarentia, 2195, South Africa) Tel: 27 11 646 0699
(Language: English)

Devlin Kuyek – (GRAIN) Tel: +1 514 270 10 83, E-mail: devlin@grain.org
(Languages: English or French)

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[1] The full report, "*Bt Cotton on the doorstep of West Africa*", will be published in March 2004. A synopsis, "*Bt Cotton at Mali's Doorstep: Time to Act!*" along with other supporting documents is now available at: <http://www.grain.org/publications/btcotton.cfm>

[2] GRAIN is an international non-governmental organisation which promotes the sustainable management and use of agricultural biodiversity based on people's control over genetic resources and local knowledge.