



AGBIZ PRESENTS ON GMO REGULATION AT SACTA INFORMATION SESSION

The South African Cultivar and Technology Agency (SACTA) hosted its annual information session at the Grain auditorium in Pretoria on the 1st of August. Two themes were discussed, namely that of transformation and technology. There was a panel discussion on the topic of an update on genome editing globally and within South Africa. The panellists were Dr Hennie Groenewald, who is the executive director of Biosafety South Africa and Annelize Crosby from Agbiz.

Essence of presentations and discussion

Food security is a key concern worldwide and locally and it is becoming more important in the face of climate change. New technologies are needed to increase crop yields and to produce more climate resistant crops. New Plant-Breeding Techniques (NBTs) are methods allowing the development of new plant varieties with desired traits, by modifying the DNA of the seeds and plant cells.

These new plant-breeding techniques hold a lot of potential for the improvement of crop characteristics and have technical as well as economic advantages compared to traditional plant breeding techniques.

There is a difference between plant breeding, mutation breeding, genetic modification and genome editing. NBTs hold great potential, in particular for developing biotech innovation systems, as they allow the relative quick, efficient, accurate and cost-effective modification of valuable genetic traits in crops, livestock and microorganisms. For all genome modified organisms the principle source of risk, i.e., the hazard, is the organism itself and not the technique/process used to generate it. This resulting product should therefore be the trigger and subject of regulation and the regulatory requirements should be proportionate to the possible risks it poses.

The South African Genetically Modified Organisms (GMO) Act is quite old – it dates from 1997 and was amended in 2006. The GMO Act places strict compliance measures on the research, production and marketing of GMOs. The definition of what a gmo is, can be interpreted as either having a product- or process-basis. However, in 2021, the Executive Council of GMO's took a decision that process-based interpretation should be followed. This means that new plant varieties that are the result of selected gene-editing technologies leading to new plant breeding innovations, are subjected to costly risk assessments required for gmo's. This is a serious cause for concern for the agricultural industry and is out of step with gmo regulation in most other countries in the world.

Agbiz lodged an internal appeal against .this decision by the GMO Executive Council. In the appeal Agbiz argued for a science-based risk analysis framework for GMOs. Agbiz requested the Minister to set aside the decision of the Executive Council. The Minister appointed an Appeal Panel consisting of experts. They made a recommendation to the Minister in December 2022. In terms of the GMO Act, section 19(6), the decision of an appeal board, together with the reasons therefor, shall be reduced to writing, and copies thereof shall be furnished to the Minister, whereupon the Minister may take such further action as he or she may deem necessary. This needs to happen within a reasonable time. The Minister's reaction to the recommendations is still awaited. Agbiz and the industry are very keen to work with the Minister and the EC and DALRRD in taking this matter forward in the interest of our country. We however need decisive action and a clear way forward, as a willingness to really engage on the matter.

By Annelize Crosby
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