



AGRICULTURAL BIOTECHNOLOGY

Issue:

Farm Bureau supports the continued development of agricultural products enhanced by modern biotechnology. Access to international markets for products of agricultural biotechnology is crucial for the continued competitiveness of U.S. agriculture.

Background:

Agricultural biotechnology is the use of recombinant-DNA science to create new products from, or to make improvements to, plants and animals. The adoption of plant biotechnology by U.S. farmers has been dramatic. Currently 92 percent of the 72 million soybean acres are planted with biotech varieties. For corn and cotton, the percentages planted with biotech varieties are 72 percent of 87 million acres and 70 percent of 10 million acres respectively. Furthermore, over the last 11 years, farmers have increased their plantings of biotech crops by double-digit growth rates each year. More than 10 million farmers from 22 countries planted biotech crops in 2006, including farmers in six European countries. However, much work remains in gaining and maintaining access to sensitive markets as the technology evolves and experience with the technology grows.

Many countries have adopted or are adopting restrictive rules on the import and distribution of products of biotechnology. The European Union (EU), for example, has adopted strict rules requiring labeling of all products of biotechnology and products produced from them, as well as a “farm to fork” traceability system for biotech products. The rules have either halted or severely restricted trade in biotech products – both food and feed – with the EU.

Several countries are in the process of adopting similarly restrictive measures under the guise of coming into compliance with their obligations as signatories of the Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety (Biosafety Protocol). The Biosafety Protocol is a multilateral environmental agreement that establishes guidelines for participating countries regarding the movement of products derived from modern agricultural biotechnology, including the requirement that shipments of products that may contain living modified organisms (such as bulk commodities of corn, soybeans or canola) be labeled accordingly.

The U.S. is not a party to the Biosafety Protocol, and AFBF opposes its ratification. Farm Bureau believes the agreement is not in the best interest of American agriculture. The U.S. signed a trilateral arrangement with Mexico and Canada to address the documentation requirements set forth in the Biosafety Protocol, and AFBF supported this arrangement.

The World Trade Organization (WTO) recognizes the Codex Alimentarius as the organization responsible for establishing internationally recognized food safety guidelines. The Codex Alimentarius established a task force to consider the health and nutritional implications of food derived from biotechnology and has appointed committees to develop guidelines for safety assessments of those foods. Codex guidelines are instrumental in ensuring that any regulatory decisions that may constitute a trade barrier be based on sound science.

AFBF Policy:

Farm Bureau supports agricultural biotechnology. America’s competitive advantage in world markets will be maintained only by the continued support and encouragement of technological advancements.

U.S. government agencies (USDA, EPA and FDA) should continue to provide unbiased, scientifically based evaluations concerning human and animal safety and wholesomeness, as well as the environmental impacts of biotechnology-enhanced products.

AFBF supports active involvement by the U.S. in the development of international standards for biotechnology, and harmonization of international standards for biotechnology, testing and adventitious presence.

AFBF opposes the imposition by foreign countries of any import restrictions, labeling or segregation requirements of any genetically modified organism once such organism has been approved according to internationally accepted, scientific principles to be as safe for humans, animals and the environment as conventional crops.

AFBF supports the maintenance of U.S. export markets by securing foreign regulatory acceptance of biotech products.

Status:

Farm Bureau has encouraged the administration to coordinate government efforts in support of biotechnology and ensure continued consumer confidence and marketability of biotech products. AFBF is committed to ensuring broader acceptance of biotechnology internationally, and is working with Congress and the administration to address trade barriers for biotech commodities.

Farm Bureau encourages the administration to undertake negotiations with the nation's major trading partners to address the documentation requirements of the Biosafety Protocol and ensure compliance with WTO obligations.

In 2006, a WTO panel ruled in favor of the U.S., Argentina and Canada in their case against the EU over its moratorium on approving agricultural biotech products and member-state bans of previously approved products. The case affirms WTO rules prohibiting trade-restrictive measures that are not based on science and that impede trade under the guise of food, feed or environmental safety.

After the initial WTO ruling, the EU was given a year to comply with the panel decision. Upon expiration of this time and subsequent determination that the EU was still not in compliance, the U.S. initiated the retaliation process. However, instead of moving directly to concessions, the U.S. laid out specific benchmarks and timelines for the EU to follow. Should the EU fail to reach these benchmarks in the allotted time, the U.S. will move to establish a concessions panel.

In Sept. 2007, the Codex Alimentarius biotech task force finished work on a new standard that, if approved by the full commission, will be used as an international standard to evaluate the health and safety of inadvertent, low levels of biotech products in food and feed. This standard will be instrumental for trade liberalization as it will be an internationally recognized, science-based guideline for dealing with the low-level presence of biotech products that have been approved in the country of export but not in the country of import. AFBF participated in the process to develop this standard.

AFBF continues to encourage the U.S. government to develop a comprehensive, coordinated national policy to address the issue of adventitious presence, or the inadvertent, low-level presence of biotech traits in the food or feed supply that have not yet completed full regulatory review requirements. AFBF supports FDA's release of guidance for early food safety evaluations and EPA's release of draft guidance for early field trials of biotech products that contain plant-incorporated protectants. These policies help ensure that products under development (in experimental or field trial stage) that are inadvertently found in the food and feed supply do not result in health safety concerns or unnecessary enforcement actions such as food recalls.

In October 2008, USDA-APHIS published a proposed rule to revise 7CFR part 340 regulations, which govern the development and movement of new biotechnology plants and control organisms. AFBF will continue to work with the USDA to ensure that the revised regulations continue to allow for the science-based regulation of plant biotechnology.

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