



## **Burkina Faso cotton industry wants to bring back GMO seeds**

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By Joseph Opoku Gakpo



*Dr. Edgar Traore of OFAB, center, with Burkinabe cotton farmers. Photo by Joseph Opoku Gakpo*

Burkina Faso's cotton industry wants to bring back the genetically modified varieties the nation phased out in 2015.

The German firm Bayer will begin negotiations with Burkinabe authorities by the end of this year to allow for a return of the [Bt](#) cotton seeds that local farmers have been demanding, according to Wilfried A. Yameogo, director general of SOFITEX, which buys an estimated 80 percent of all cotton produced in the West African nation.

Bt cotton — genetically engineered to provide inherent resistance to the bollworm pests that can destroy up to 90 percent of a farmer's yield — was introduced in Burkina Faso in 2008. The new cultivar helped control pests on cotton farms, reducing the use of pesticides by up to 70 percent. A national study showed the introduction of Bt cultivars in Burkina Faso led to a 22 percent increase in yield over conventional cultivars, and households recorded an average profit gain of 51 percent.

But challenges related to a [shorter fiber length](#) caused Burkinabe authorities to halt cultivation of the variety in 2015 — much to the displeasure of farmers who have since been demanding its return.

“All farmers who have experience with Bt cotton are regretting the shift from Bt to conventional cotton... but they are helpless and hope that the government will listen to their plea,” Francois Traore, president of the Union of Cotton Producers in Burkina Faso, said in an interview.

Yameogo says their wish will be granted soon as a new partner is brought in to develop new Bt varieties with longer fibers. “It is the shortening of the fiber that has led to the break with the Monsanto partner and the sector is looking for a new partner with which it will develop new Bt cotton seeds.... Contacts in this direction have been taken since December 2014 with the German firm Bayer, who agreed in principle. Negotiations have been held back by the process of buying Monsanto by Bayer, who promised to return to the table with the Burkinabé sector in 2018,” he explained in a statement.

Yameogo confirmed that Bt cotton helped control pest infestation in fields, noting that farmers were able to reduce the number of [insecticide](#) treatments per hectare from six treatments on average for conventional cotton to two treatments for Bt cotton.

Burkina Faso has a restrictive cotton industry, and the cotton buying companies supply farmers with chemicals, seeds and other inputs as pre-season loans that are recovered from farmers after harvest. Cotton buying companies in the country faced a barrage

of criticism after Burkina Faso lost its place as number one cotton producer in Africa — a situation attributed, among other factors, to the decision to reverse GM cotton production.

The reversal has led to increased use of pesticides on the fields and some farmers have complained the chemicals are ineffective. But SOFITEX is defending the quality of its inputs, insisting poor rainfall and an influx of new insect pests are responsible for the emerging challenges and poor yields.

“Since the end of August, we recorded a recession of rains more or less severe depending on the agricultural areas and whose impact on cotton growth has been disastrous, due to pockets of drought,” Yameogo said. The company also claims the decline is the result of attacks by white flies. “The situation has worsened with the appearance of the white fly in areas of concentration of market gardening crops,” he said.

But some agricultural stakeholders in the country disagree, insisting the role of the withdrawal of Bt crops caused the decline. “Although it is true that the general figure for 2017/18 rainy season was insufficient, it is good to mention that in some other areas where there was enough rain, yields were still poor,” said Dr. Edgar Traore, national coordinator of the Open Forum on Agricultural Biotechnology in Africa (OFAB).

“From the research side, we know that seed contributes to about 40 percent to the overall yield,” Traore added. “The question is: what was the seed quality for this campaign? They talk about discussion with Bayer but I am not aware of anything moving in such a direction. What is clear is that a majority of farmers are clamoring for a quick return of the Bt technology. Farmers seem to recognize advantages of Bt cotton after two years’ experience with conventional.”

Bamouni Aboubacar, who works with cotton farmers as an agricultural input dealer, says the farmers’ push for a return of Bt crops is a good move. “Cotton producers in Burkina never asked to return to conventional cotton. Conventional cotton is very expensive for farmers because it takes more than six [pesticide](#) treatments per hectare, and in addition, those multiple treatments play on the biodiversity, the environment and the health of the farmers,” he explained

Farmers are worried because they are incurring huge losses now with conventional cotton. “When I planted GM cotton in 2014, I made 40,000 CFA (US\$80) per hectare,” said Bambio Dambo, a farmer in the Hounde District of Burkina Faso. “Last year, I made a profit of only 10,000 CFA (\$20) per hectare when I planted conventional seeds. In fact, in 2015, the last year we grew GMO, I made a total income of 3 m CFA (\$5,370). In 2016, when we grew conventional, I made total income of just 575,000 CFA (\$1,029).”

Yamego is promising the farmers some reprieve. “In this perspective, SOFITEX will negotiate with the banks concerned to reschedule credit over two or three campaigns and examine the internal debt situation,” he said.

He also indicated the company, in partnership with the World Bank and the International Finance Corporation (IFC), has initiated the Irrigation Access Project to increase the resilience of farms to water stress. “For the next 2018/2019 campaign, 200 basins will be set up for producers meeting certain criteria and having subscribed on a voluntary basis,” he said.

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