



Kenya begins national performance trials on GMO cotton

BY JOAN CONROW

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Kenya yesterday officially began its national performance trials on pest-resistant genetically modified (GMO) cotton.

The pest-resistant Bt cotton seeds were planted in Kibos, paving the way for Kenya to join other nations, including the US, South Africa and India, that are growing the crop. Farmers like the GMO cotton because it greatly reduces the need for pesticides and results in a higher yield.

It has taken 17 years of research and government scrutiny to reach this point, according to Dr. Charles Waturu, director of Kenya's Horticulture Research Institute.

"The much-awaited seed of hope is finally seeing the light of day," reported Kenya television station.

The Institute conducted confined field trials between 2004 and 2010. It then prepared a report that was used to apply for open release of the crop, which protects against African bollworm — cotton's most devastating pest. It can reduce yields by 50 to 90 percent. Due to Bt cotton's inherent resistant to the worm, it can boost yields five-fold, according to Waturu.

The National Environmental Management Authority issued a permit for the performance trials and agreed to drop some of the more stringent regulations attached to the license.

Kibos was the first of seven trial sites to be planted in five counties in Kenya this month. Other locales include Alupe, Barwessa, Perkerra, Mwea, Bura and Matuga. The trials will take about seven months. If they prove successful, Kenyan farmers could access the improved seeds in early 2019.

Cotton farmer James Midega said the Bt cotton can improve the health of farmers and their families because they will be able to reduce their pesticide use.

Kenya currently has 39,000 cotton farmers. But the sector could support some 200,000 farmers and boost the nation's production 10-fold — from 30,000 bales per year to 368,000 — through access to better seeds.

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