

# Kenya reconsidering GMO crop ban to support food security

BY VERENARDO MEEME APRIL 30, 2019 SHARE

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Kenya is reconsidering its **2012 import ban** on genetically modified maize as more than 1 million of its citizens require urgent humanitarian food assistance due to prolonged drought.

"In the next one or two months, we will have a decision about the future of that ban," said Professor Hamadi Mboga, principal secretary in the country's ministry of agriculture, which oversees agricultural research.

The decision could determine whether Kenya's farmers are ultimately able to access and plant improved genetically modified (GM) seeds.

Residents of the Tana River, Turkana, Marsabit, Isiolo and Garissa counties are facing severe food and water shortages due to prolonged drought, Kenya's meteorological department reported in March.

"Why can't we allow drought-tolerant varieties to be planted in Turkana and Pokot and Kitui?" asked Florence Mutua, the Busia County Member of Parliament. "We would be food secure if we did so. We are just wasting time discussing GM technology. We have capacity and brains to deploy the technology."

Smallholder farmers are also eager for improved GM crops, said Daniel Mangodu, leader of the Society for Biotech Farmers of Kenya.

"We are waiting for these genetically modified crops like yesterday," Mangodu said. "I have been calculating losses from maize and cotton farming. Maize is attacked by stem borers even before it produces tassel. Over 13 percent of the total harvest is destroyed and now aggravated further by drought and fall armyworm and maize lethal necrosis. These challenges leave a farmer with the option of spraying [pesticides] up to 12 times."

The government's "Big 4" agenda highlights food security as one of its key areas of focus. Research shows that the demand for maize as a staple crop is increasing, with the country's population now at 48 million. Projections estimate that one person consumes one bag of maize per year, and demand is quickly outstripping supply. Mboga links low maize production to droughts, pests and diseases.

"We produce two metric tonnes per hectare while the global standard is 12 metrics tons per hectare," he said in explaining why Kenya is now exploring biotechnology as a means for improving production and food security. "If we tap and explore new tools offered by biotechnology, we will help bridge the production gap and help Kenyans not to depend on relief food for the rest of their lives and their children," Mboga said, noting that drought-tolerant maize variety is an option for communities in the more arid regions. Over two million Kenyans receive food aid annually.

"We are punishing our farmers and people involved in ag value chains by denying them tools such as biotechnology," said Dr. Oundo Mudenyo Funyula, the constituency Member of Parliament.

Kenya has completed its confined fields trials (CFTs) on GM maize. The crop will move to the National Performance Trials (NPT) stage once it is approved by the relevant state regulatory agencies. Insect-resistant/drought-tolerant GM maize will be an important addition to the farmer's basket, according to the Kenya chapter Open Forum on Agricultural Biotechnology (OFAB). Other crops undergoing biotech research in the country include cassava and sorghum. Insect-resistant Bt cotton is currently in the NPT stage of development.

Only about 10 percent of Kenya's land is arable, and agriculture is predominantly rainfed. Most farmers work without modern seeds and technology or adequate financial or extension services, offering significant room for increases in productivity, according to the Ministry of Agriculture and the **Feed the Future report** released last month.

Meanwhile, the demand for food is projected to rise by at least 20 percent globally over the next 15 years, with the largest increases anticipated in Sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia and East Asia, the report notes. Nearly 13 percent of the population in developing countries was undernourished in 2014 and 1 in 9 people suffered from chronic hunger. These statistics could worsen as climate change is expected to severely cut food production, especially in the world's most food-insecure regions.

"As we debate about biotech crops, let us be objective and discuss science with science, religion with religion, politics with politics so that we come up with an outcome based on facts," Mboga urged. "Let us not lag behind as far as the technology is concerned. In the era of the genome, these are areas we should explore just like everybody else for the benefit of our people."

Kenya has a strong scientific community and strong regulating institutions with the capacity to oversee and regulate GM crops, he said. "If we get it right in agriculture,

we get it right in the economy," he explained, citing biotechnology as an opportunity for Kenya to expand its economy. Agriculture accounts for 33 percent of the nation's gross domestic product (GDP). "We have immense possibilities if we embrace technologies."

In an effort to improve public awareness about GM crops and animals, a "national dialogue" was held last week at the University of Nairobi, organized by OFAB, the Kenya Agricultural and Livestock Research Organization (KALRO), National Biosafety Authority (NBA), National Commission on Science and Technology (NACOSTI) and Kenya University Biotechnology Consortium (KUBICO).

Mboga said that dialogue will continue to educate the public about the opportunities and possibilities of adopting agricultural biotechnology.

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