

Public Consultation on the National Biosafety Policy of Belize

Every year the world celebrates **World Food Day** to mark and recognize the importance that Agriculture must play for the public to have access to an adequate supply of safe and nutritious food to meet dietary needs and food preferences for a active and healthy life style. This is **Food Security** as defined by the **Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO)**.

This year, Belize recognized World Food Day on Friday 13th under the theme **“Investing in Agriculture for Food Security”**. The actual official day recognized as World Food Day internationally is celebrated on October 16th to mark the anniversary of the founding of FAO. The theme under which Belize held its activities in “Beautiful Dangriga”(using the apt description of the municipality of Dangriga by the popular radio personality Ms. Gwen Nunez- Gonzalez) this past Friday is the same theme that is put forward internationally by FAO for all countries in 2006.

What is the status of investment in Agriculture?

There is a declining trend worldwide for investment in agriculture. Foreign aid for agriculture and rural development has declined from a total of over US\$9 billion per year in the early 1980s, to less than US\$5 billion in the late 1990s with an estimated 854 million people around the world being undernourished. It is widely felt and acknowledged that only investment in agriculture – together with support for education and health – will turn this situation around.

A significant investment in agriculture come from **Biotechnology** applications to agriculture. With Biotechnology, technology is applied to organisms and biological systems for possible enhanced production - largely through the genetic manipulation of plants and animals to increase their resistance to pests, agricultural stresses, herbicide and pesticide tolerance and to create enhanced nutritional qualities. This is **Modern Biotechnology** – the products of which is widely known as **Genetic Modified Organisms** or **GMOs**.

Approximately 6 years ago from the 1st November to 18th December 2000, FAO ran an electronic conference (e-conference), entitled "Can agricultural biotechnology help to reduce hunger and increase food security in developing countries?" The main impetus behind the choice of this theme for the e-conference was to discuss the appropriateness of agricultural biotechnologies, i.e. their potential role in increasing food security and reducing hunger in developing countries. The level of participation and debate that occurred during this conference was higher than any other e - conference that FAO had previously held, indicating the wide interest in the subject.

Certain aspects of discussion concerning biotechnology are very polarised. One of the most hard-fought debating issues regarding biotechnology, and especially genetically modified (GM) crops, is whether they can be of potential value for food security and elimination of hunger in developing countries.

There are two divergent viewpoints. One argument states that biotechnology has great potential, the world's population is increasing steadily (and almost all growth is in developing

countries) and that biotechnology will enable mankind to increase food supplies to feed the world's new inhabitants.

The other side argues that biotechnology is primarily in the hands of private industry, that the private industry has to make profits and lacks a real interest in the world's poor, but will use any marketing opportunities to promote the use of biotechnology.

What are your views? Modern Biotechnology will affect your world - you need to know what the issues are so that you can make an informed decision as to whether you consider the use and application of products of modern biotechnology (GMOs) a positive one - one that you can openly embrace and derive great benefits from, contributing significantly to Belize's development and wealth, or one that you are very cautious about – one that you feel may bring unacceptable risk to your health and Belize's Biodiversity.

Why else should you be concerned? In spite of the major investment in agriculture through Biotechnology, it is **small scale farmers** who, as a group are really the biggest investors in agriculture – They also tend to have inadequate or precarious access to food themselves and they face many obstacles – many beyond their control such as: lack of credit, poor transport, low prices and poorly developed business relations with agribusinesses – to say nothing of natural factors such as drought, flood, pests and disease.

If small scale farmers can make a profit with their farming, they can feed their families throughout the year and reinvest in their farms by purchasing fertilizer, better quality seed and basic equipment. How does modern biotechnology affect them and indeed by extension, us as consumers? Will GMOs enhance their production? Contribute to sustainability of their crops and livestock? Or will it increase their already precarious state, negatively affecting their socioeconomic situation and the biodiverse environment that defines the small scale farmer? What are the risks? Are they real?

This is what the **National Biosafety Committee (NBC)** is all about – The National Biosafety Committee (NBC) was appointed in November 2002 by the Minister of Agriculture. The agencies, organizations, government departments that are represented on the NBC include the following: Ministries of Agriculture and Fisheries, Natural Resources and the Environment, Commerce and Industry, National Development, Health, The Attorney General's Ministry, The Belize Agricultural Health Authority (BAHA), Pan American Health Organization (PAHO), Inter-American Institute for Cooperation on Agriculture (IICA), International Regional Organization for Health in Agriculture (OIRSA), Caribbean Agricultural Research and Development Institute (CARDI), Belize Citrus Growers Association, Belize Banana Growers Association, and the University of Belize. The NBC is tasked with the mandate to put in place a **National Biosafety Framework (NBF)** which is a combination of policy, legal, administrative and technical instruments that are developed to ensure an adequate level of protection in the use and handling of GMOs that may have adverse effects on animal, plant, and human health and the environment - in essence, to ensure **Biosafety** in Belize

The establishment of the NBF is also part of our international agreement and commitment that Belize has signed on to – for us to develop a policy, legislation, an administrative system to handle notifications and request for imports or authorized use of GMOs or products of modern biotechnology, and to put in place a monitoring and enforcement mechanism and a

system for public awareness and consultations regarding the safe use, trade and handling of GMOs.

The World Food Day celebrations in Dangriga was the venue for the launch of a Draft National Biosafety Policy for Belize that has been developed by the National Biosafety Committee. The day also marked the start of a series of public awareness and consultations that the committee will be engaging in over the next few weeks.

The NBC do not expect that the public discourse on GMOs to stop with the organized public consultations as outlined below- modern biotechnology presents very technical and complicated issues which will need lots of discussion and input from all sectors of the society if we are to have a policy and Biosafety framework that is sound, effective, and beneficial to all of society. The committee pleas for you to engage in the discussion – don't be intimidated- Modern Biotechnology is new to a lot of us - including “the experts”- lets start the discussion, its our health, our environment, and our right!

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