



USDA Foreign Agricultural Service

GAIN Report

Global Agriculture Information Network

Template Version 2.09

Required Report - public distribution

Date: 12/13/2004

GAIN Report Number: PA4005

Paraguay

Biotechnology

Biotech Activity in Paraguay

2004

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Report Highlights:

As a continuation to a FAS sponsored biotechnology conference in Paraguay in 2002, a follow-up conference was held in Asuncion, November 16 - 17, 2004. The first day of the conference focused on Paraguayan Parliament members and the Paraguayan Biotechnology Commission. The second day was a full day conference for the media, academia, and consumers. Experts from Argentina, Mexico, Paraguay, and the United States gave presentations covering the different issues related to biotechnology, specifically genetically modified organisms (GMOs). The events allowed the Paraguayan audience to acquire information on GMOs and to learn from the real-life experiences of other countries.

Includes PSD Changes: No
Includes Trade Matrix: No
Unscheduled Report
Buenos Aires [AR1]
[PA]

Day 1 – Lunch with Parliament members

On Nov 16, 2004 approximately 40 members of the Paraguayan Congress (out of a total of 125 members), the Paraguayan Minister of Agriculture, and the Paraguayan Minister of Environment, attended a working luncheon during which experts from Argentina, Paraguay, Mexico and the United States discussed agricultural biotechnology. This initiative was proposed as the Paraguayan Congress is currently evaluating a biosecurity law and several members expressed a need for more information and guidance in the biotechnology area. Opening remarks by the U.S. Ambassador to Paraguay and the Paraguayan Minister of Agriculture emphasized that biotechnology is a tool that can be used to reduce the poverty of many Paraguayan farmers.

Later the same day, a separate meeting was held between the conference speakers and the Paraguayan Commission of Biotechnology. In this framework, Paraguayan and international experts generated a rich debate and established relationships for future contact and consultations.

Day 2 – Public Conference

On Nov 17, 225 government officials, members of the academia, media representatives, members of consumer associations and the general public attended a full day conference on biotechnology.

Speakers spoke on the following topics:

- The history of biotechnology, current trends and future expectations;
- Public perception, the Argentine Biosecurity Framework;
- Markets and biotechnology, the Argentine experience and the impact on international markets;
- The experience of Argentine producers regarding the use of biotechnology; and,
- The Cartagena Protocol: the experience of Mexico and the current biotechnology situation in Paraguay.

A common thread throughout the presentations was that biotechnology is not new; it has been present in one form or another for thousands of years but does not claim to solve all the world's problems. Additionally, the conference speakers reiterated that decisions regarding the use of biotechnology and GMOs should be based on sound science, not on unfounded sensationalistic claims. During the question and answer sessions participants requested data that showed that benefits include greater yields and less pesticide use. Also several participants questioned the validity of claims (made in the media and by NGOs) that planting GMO soy would displace small farmers. Several participants voiced their concern that paying royalties for the use of GMOs would only benefit large multinational companies, as well as inquired about safeguards that exist to prevent the creation of super weeds.

Conclusions

Paraguay, a poor, primarily agricultural country, is in desperate need of scientifically based information on the advantages and disadvantages of agricultural biotechnology. The timing of this activity was extremely relevant due to the recent approval of four biotech events and the fact that the Paraguayan congress is currently evaluating a biosecurity law. FAS contacts in different areas mentioned that the members of the congress were extremely satisfied with the initiative and expressed their gratitude to the organizers for giving them the opportunity to interact with international experts in the field of biotechnology.

During a press conference, Vice Minister of Agriculture said that Paraguay would benefit substantially if “this tool is used correctly”. He also stated that for a country with most of its economy based in the agricultural sector and with limited natural resources, which participates in a global market economy, the development of new technology is fundamental to boost crop production and quality. He expressed his support for the conference, stating that Paraguay is in the early stage of development of infrastructure for and public knowledge of biotechnology. Because of this, the country has a great need for information, support, and training.

Positive articles in the mainstream Paraguayan newspapers over several days accurately reported on presentations and audience questions.