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Biotech Outreach to Germany

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Approved by:

Bobby Richey
U.S. Embassy

Prepared by:

Dietmar Achilles

Report Highlights:

FAS Berlin continues its successful outreach program on biotech to Germany. In January 2007, an American corn and soybean farmer reported to four groups of parliamentarians, farmers and farm students about his experiences with planting biotech seeds. The interest in these presentations has been surprisingly good, resulting in a government party press release supporting biotech crop research and production.

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Continuation of Successful Biotech Outreach Programs to Germany

In early summer 2006 FAS Berlin started a series of successful outreach programs with American farmers meeting German farmers and politicians. Two leadership groups of American Farm Bureau Federation, American Seed Trade Association and the National Corn Growers Association met with a variety of German farmers and agricultural association representatives in the eastern part of the country in the states of Brandenburg, Sachsen-Anhalt and Mecklenburg-Vorpommern.

These meetings were very successful proving strong interest on the side of German farmers in the regions visited in practical experience of American farmers growing biotech crops for about ten years. FAS Berlin decided to proceed in the strategy to reach out to interested farmers in biotech growth regions. Instead of concentrating outreach efforts to political leadership levels on the federal government level FAS Germany realized that the support of farmers who are already generally interested in biotech crops is of greater yield. The biotech industry reports that significantly more hectares will be planted to Bt-corn in 2007 compared to the previous years. Biotech seeds planting farmers will have to register their production intention latest three months ahead of actual planting. By mid-January 2007, 1,273 hectares were already registered. Since corn planting takes place in the second half of April till mid-May field registration numbers are likely to rise further.

In the second week of January 2007, FAS Germany and the National Center for Food and Agricultural Policy (NCFAP) carried out an outreach activity on biotech in Germany. The two speakers Dr. Sankula, director for biotechnology at NCFAP and Don Thompson, a farmer from Indiana, gave presentations from the researcher's and the farmer's point of view. FAS Berlin had organized meetings with federal and state parliamentarians in Berlin and Brandenburg, a seminar at the University Halle/Wittenberg and the participation in a biotech seminar arranged by InnoPlanta, a platform for German farmers interested in planting biotech crops. All the meetings were extremely well attended. Dr. Sankula and Don Thompson touched following main points in their presentations:

- Biotech seeds provide an additional attractive tool for the farmer;
- Biotech seeds do not solve all the farmers' problems;
- Reduction of chemical inputs;
- Production of healthy crops;
- Preventive actions against resistance building
- Use of refuge areas
- Co-existence with organic farmers
- Dependence from technology providers and competition in the seed business
- Advantages of stacked traits; and
- Consumer acceptance of biotech products.

The following discussion sessions were also very lively. The questions focused on

- Co-existence between biotech crops producing farms and organic farms;
- Liability issues between organic and biotech farmers;
- Economic dependence from technology providers and big seed companies;
- Resistance building in biotech crops;
- Labeling of biotech crops;
- Consumer acceptance of biotech crops; and
- Consumer knowledge and consumer interest to know what they eat.

The meetings were attended by farmers, farm students, parliamentarians, the Brandenburg Commissioner for Agriculture, press and NGOs. As a result of the meeting with two Bundestag parliamentarians the conservative party Christian democrats Union (CDU), the party of Chancellor Merkel, put out a press release calling for a factual and scientific dealing with Green Biotechnology.