USDA Foreign Agricultural Service
GAIN Report
Global Agricultural Information Network

THIS REPORT CONTAINS ASSESSMENTS OF COMMODITY AND TRADE ISSUES MADE BY USDA STAFF AND NOT NECESSARILY STATEMENTS OF OFFICIAL U.S. GOVERNMENT POLICY

Required Report - public distribution

Date: 7/3/2010
GAIN Report Number: SA1013

Saudi Arabia

Biotechnology - GE Plants and Animals

Annual Report

Approved By:
Tawhid Al-Saffy
Prepared By:
Hussein Mousa

Report Highlights:
In December 2001, the Saudi Ministry of Commerce and Industry (MOCI) implemented its biotech labeling decree for processed foodstuffs. The decree requires positive biotech labeling if a product contains more than 0.9 percent genetically modified vegetable (plant) ingredients. Also, in January 2004, the Saudi Arabian Ministry of Agriculture (MOA) implemented a comparable biotech-labeling requirement on animal feed, fruit and vegetables while banning imports of GE seeds. Both ministries justify that the purpose of biotech labeling was not a concern about GE products safety but consumers right to know how food products they purchase are produced in order to make educated purchase decisions.

Section I. Executive Summary:

In January 2004 and December 2001, MOA and MOCI implemented biotech-labeling decrees on animal feed and processed foodstuffs respectively. The decrees require positive biotech labeling if a product contains more than 0.9 percent of genetically engineered (GE) vegetable (plant) ingredients. GE grains such as corn and soybean meal are being imported from the U.S. and other suppliers. According to Saudi importers, U.S. high value food products declared biotech free have tested negative and companies whose products test negative will not be tested again for another six months. In May 2009, all responsibilities of inspecting imported high value products at the 27 Saudi ports of entry and implementing standards were passed to the Saudi Food and Drug Authority (SFDA). The SFDA will take charge of setting food standards in the next few months. Currently, food standards are set by the Saudi Arabian Standards Organization (SASO) while imported foodstuffs were tested before May 2009 by MOCI. The SFDA will take over inspections of imported animal feed, fruits, and vegetables from MOA within a year.

After working on three biotech draft standards for three years, Saudi Arabia decided in February 2009 to abandon its efforts to issue national biotech standards and opted to join hands with other members of the Gulf Cooperation Council to work on promulgating GCC wide agricultural biotech standards under the auspices of the Gulf Standards Organization (GSO).

In February 2008, the GSO established an Agricultural Biotech subcommittee and converted the three Saudi Arabian Standards Organization (SASO) biotech draft standards to GSO draft standards. The biotech subcommittee has met a couple of times since its establishment to review the three draft standards submitted by SASO. However, the subcommittee has not yet made any decision whether it will adopt the SASO draft standards or modify and issue another set of draft standards for public comments.

Section II. Plant Biotechnology Trade and Production:

In January 2004, MOA banned imports of GE seeds and thus no biotech crop is grown in the country. Both the MOA and MOCI, allow imports of biotech grain and plant/vegetable based processed foodstuffs as long as they are labeled. For U.S. biotech grains, the MOA has accepted a one-time biotech grains certification statement from the Grain Inspection, Packers and Stockyards Administration (GIPSA) submitted to the Ministry in 2003. The statement certified that the exported transgenic grains are the same as those consumed in the United States. The approved statement eliminates the need for a shipment-by-shipment positive biotech certification for corn and soybean meal exported to the Kingdom. The MOA still requires each shipment of biotech fruits and vegetables to be labeled and accompanied by a biotech health certificate. In 2004, the MOA banned imports of all types of biotech seeds.

Section III. Plant Biotechnology Policy:

In December 2001, MOCI implemented its biotech labeling decree for processed foodstuffs. The decree requires positive biotech labeling if a product contains more than 0.9 percent genetically modified vegetable (plant) ingredients. Also, in January 2004, the MOA implemented a comparable

biotech-labeling requirement on animal feed, fruit and vegetables while banning imports of GE seeds. Both ministries justify that the purpose of biotech labeling was not a concern about GE products safety but consumers right to know how food products they purchase are produced in order to make educated purchase decisions.

Following is a summary of the biotech labeling requirements implemented by the MOCI

A. Positive labeling: If a product contains one or more GE plant ingredient, the information should be clearly communicated to the consumer by labeling. A triangle should be drawn on the label with text that should read "Contains Genetically Modified Product (s)". The SFDA will not accept a statement that says "This Product May Contain biotech Ingredients". The statement should clearly state that the product contains GE ingredients if more than 0.9 percent GE positive. Saudi Arabia does not permit imports of foodstuffs that contain GE animal products. According to the SFDA, local food producers must also abide by the biotech labeling requirements.

B. Bilingual labeling: The biotech statement must be clearly written in Arabic and English languages with ink color different from that of the main product tag.

C. Health certificate: Biotech products exported to Saudi Arabia must have been approved in the country of origin for human or animal consumption. Each shipment must be accompanied by a health certificate issued by a government agency stating that the GE ingredient used in the foodstuff is approved in the country of origin for human or animal consumption.

D. PCR Real Time Method: MOC approved the PCR Real Time Method for GE testing and set 0.9 percent threshold. If the test results reveal more than 0.9 percent of GE ingredient, the product is either destroyed locally or re-exported to the country of origin. Products with less than 0.9 percent of GE content are exempt from further testing for six months. If still on the market after six months, these products must be tested and recertified. Presently, no GE-labeled retail food products are marketed in Saudi Arabia, but GE-labeled bulk commodities and products destined for institutional end users are imported and marketed.

E. Biotech health certificate: The MOCI has agreed to accept health certificates issued by state departments of agriculture for high value products instead of the previous requirement that the certificates be issued by a federal government agency such as USDA or FDA for U.S. products. The Ministry has reiterated its refusal to consider any health certificate issued by exporting companies or other private organizations including notary public statements.

F. For U.S. grains: The MOA has accepted a one-time biotech grains certification statement from the Grain Inspection, Packers and Stockyards Administration (GIPSA) submitted to the Ministry in 2003. The statement certified that the exported transgenic grains are the same as those consumed in the United States. The approved statement eliminates the need for a shipment-by-shipment positive biotech certification for corn and soybean meal exported to the Kingdom. The MOA still requires each shipment of biotech fruits and vegetables to be labeled and accompanied by a biotech health certificate. In 2004, the MOA banned imports of all types of biotech seeds.

G. In February 2005, the Saudi Government announced the establishment of a national high-level biotech committee consisting of four ministries, the Saudi Arabian Standard Organization (SASO),

universities and the private sector to conduct a comprehensive policy review of current biotech labeling requirements based on two ministerial decrees. The committee distributed its first draft standard for public comment in early May 2005 and received comments in August 2005. After taking into consideration comments received from all interested parties including USDA, SASO distributed another set of draft standards listed below for public comment in early 2006.

SASO Draft No 3002 /2006 "General Requirements for Genetically Modified Processed Food and Feed"

SASO Draft No 3195 /2006 "General Requirements for Genetically Modified unprocessed Agricultural Products"

SASO Draft No 3196 /2006 "General Requirements for Risk Assessment and Traceability"

Comments on the above three draft standards were delivered to SASO by the end of March 2006.

After working on the above mentioned three biotech draft standards for three years, SASO decided to abandon its efforts to issue national biotech standards and opted to join hands with other members of the GCC (U.A.E., Oman, Qatar, Kuwait and Bahrain) to work on promulgating GCC wide agricultural biotech standards under the auspices of the Gulf Standards Organization (GSO). In February 2008, the GSO established an Agricultural Biotech subcommittee and converted the three SASO biotech draft standards to GSO draft standards. The subcommittee is expected to review the three draft standards in November 2009. According to SASO, the three biotech draft standards contain some of the comments provided by the U.S. and other countries in 2006.

H. Saudi Arabia has ratified the United Nations Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety under the UN Convention on Biological Diversity and implements its rules. The Kingdom's Biosafety Committee, which is headed by the King AbdulAziz City for Science and Technology's (KACST) Natural Resources and Environmental Research Institute, has been working to draft national Biosafety rules. As a signatory to the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), Saudi Arabia attends Access and Benefit Sharing conventions such as the upcoming Resumed Ninth meeting of the Ad Hoc Open-ended Working Group on Access and Benefit-sharing (WG ABS 9 Resumed) which is scheduled in Montreal, Canada from July 10-16, 2010.

I. Saudi Arabia is a member of Codex Alimentarius (Codex) and the World Organization for Animal (OIE). It regularly attends Codex and OIE meetings; however, it does not often take positions until international agreements are reached.

Section IV. Plant Biotechnology Marketing Issues:

Both SFDA and MOA allow imports of processed and bulk biotech agricultural products, respectively, provided they are labeled if biotech content is more than 0.9 percent in a given product. Biotech grains such as corn and soybean meal are imported from the U.S. and other suppliers. Saudi labs at the port of entry take food samples on a random basis for biotech testing. According to Saudi companies that import foodstuffs from the U.S., test results thus far have been satisfactory. Food products declared biotech free have tested negative, and companies whose products test negative will not be tested again for another 6 months.

Since biotech labeling requirements were issued in 2001, no GE retail packed food products have been imported to Saudi Arabia. Major foodstuff importers, who import foodstuffs either under their own brand names or who serve as exclusive agents for well known international brands do not import biotech foods and they do not put biotech label on their food products. They are concerned about doing that could jeopardize their product image and result in loosing market shares which they have developed over several years given that consumers have limited knowledge about agricultural biotechnology. On the other hand, some European, Asian and local food producers put the biotech free symbol on their product labels.

Several local newspapers articles issued on agricultural biotechnology over the past several years concentrated solely on its alleged negative impact on human health as well as on the environment. Articles published in European newspapers, mostly, written by Green Peace and other anti-agricultural biotech groups, were re-published in local newspapers. No local government agencies or agricultural research centers have initiated a favorable media campaign to give unbiased information on biotech food to the public. MOCI has made it unequivocally clear on several occasions that the primary reasons for requiring labeling of biotech foods are the consumers' right to know. Consequently, importers have been asking their U.S. suppliers to put the biotech free symbol on product labels to match initiatives taken by many European suppliers. Shoppers in local supermarkets can now find many American and European foodstuffs with biotech free labels.

Section V. Plant Biotechnology Capacity Building and Outreach:

In June 2008, ATO Riyadh helped recruit several high level GCC food safety officials to visit the United States for a series of biotechnology meetings and informational exchanges with regulatory officials and private industry. In October 2008, ATO Riyadh and GSO organized the first joint three-day biotech seminar in Dubai, U.A.E. stressing the importance of science-based protocols to assess risk for agricultural biotechnology. While the USDA provided six biotech experts to speak and pay for for their travel costs, the GSO paid for costs related to organizing the seminar. Nearly, 100 Gulf food safety and standard officials attended the seminar. The conference created a forum where U.S. and international views on various policy aspects of agricultural biotechnology were heard and discussed. The seminar will assist the GSO biotech committee in reviewing its biotech draft standards and issuing science-based biotech standards that will govern imports of agricultural products to the six GCC member countries.

Section VI. Animal Biotechnology:

In December 2001, Saudi Arabia banned imports of food products that contain any GE animal ingredient. According to Islamic law (Sharia), which is implemented in Saudi Arabia, meat and meat products must come from livestock and poultry in addition to meeting Halal (lawful) slaughtering guidelines. Moreover, Sharia bans consumption of pork and food ingredients or additives that contain pork products, including pork fat and gelatin. Livestock and poultry meat shipments must be accompanied by a Halal slaughter certificate issued by Saudi government authorized Islamic center in the country of origin.

Section VII. Author Defined: