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Biotech Outreach Program successfully conducted in Romania

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Report Highlights:

In September 2013, FAS Bucharest partnered with several stakeholders to conduct a biotechnology outreach program in Romania**.** Dr. Ralph Scorza, the keynote speaker from USDA, gave presentations on the global status of agricultural biotechnology and on specific research being conducted on plum-pox, the common virus decimating stone fruits in Romania and other EU member states. This report provides a description of the program carried out in Romania.

General Information:
Activity name: "Spur interest for applied biotechnology in Czech Republic, Romania and France"; Project Code: 00003894; Beginning/Ending Dates for Romania: September 8-10, 2013

City/Country: Bucharest and Bistrita Nasaud - Romania

Purpose of the activity

The primary goal of this comprehensive regional activity was to consolidate past outreach efforts for maintaining an open attitude towards biotechnology in each of the three-targeted countries: Czech Republic, Romania, and France. Dr. Ralph Scorza, USDA's Agricultural Research Service (ARS), participated in several forums on the role of biotechnology. In Romania, Dr. Scorza delivered presentations concerning the worldwide agricultural biotechnology status and specific research results on the viral resistant improvements in plums, utilizing genetic engineering, as a tool to control the plum-pox virus.

Public research institutions from the Czech Republic, France, and Romania have been working with USDA's Agricultural Research Service to develop a bioengineered plum tree, called *HoneySweet*", which is resistant to the plum-pox virus. The consortium, set among the most interested member states and USDA/ARS, is now seeking EU deregulation to allow commercial release of the genetically engineered event. Czech Republic will be the member state applying for the deregulation at the EU authorities. While many field trials have been successfully completed already (Czech Republic), it is crucial to share experience and work on strategy regarding the deregulation process.

Considering the above, the secondary goal of the activity was to meet with research counterparts in the above-mentioned countries, which have been pioneers in the genetic development in plum trees, aiming to coagulate necessary forces and resources among potential supporters of the plum-pox project to move the Plum-pox dossier forward to European Food Safety Authority (EFSA) for review.

Activity Description

US Missions in Bucharest, Prague, and Paris via the FAS offices organized, in cooperation with local agricultural academies, universities, and research institutes, events dedicated to sustainable agriculture and agronomic practices to address concerns on the safeness and efficacy of biotechnology. Audiences included local Government officials, key members of the Parliament, Universities, research institutes, farmers, livestock producers, feed-compound manufacturers, traders, and media in these respective countries.

Detailed information pertaining to the activities carried out in Romania is provided below.

<u>Background information</u>

Since before joining the European Union in 2007 Romania has been open to biotechnology, along with

its development, importation, and cultivation. Despite bureaucratic requirements complying with both EU and national regulations, farmers have remained attached to modern technologies. In 2013, an estimated area of 830 hectares was planted with bioengineered corn (four times more than in 2012). Not all are in favor of the technology as evidenced in February 2013 when a member of the Chamber of Deputies raised for debate a draft law to prohibit the cultivation and importation of products enhanced through biotechnology or products containing ingredients enhanced through biotechnology. The draft law, discussed and rejected by the Romanian Senate in May 2013, moved the debate over within the Chamber of Deputies.

Apart from field crops, Romania's horticultural sector should benefit from adoption of modern technology as well. Romania's fruit orchards cover about 145,000 hectares, of which plum trees cover 68,500 hectares. The plum volume harvested yearly varies between 430,000 to 580,000 MT, placing Romania among the top five plum producers in the world and first among EU members states.

Nevertheless, it is important to note that although plum plantations cover a significant area, only a limited percentage is held by commercial entities, while the largest area is in the hands of small land owners. Over the years these producers established associations at regional levels, but they have not established a strong producers association at the national level. This lack of representation in general inhibits farmers' ability to make their voices heard during the decision-taking process.

The Sharka disease, produced by the Plum-Pox virus *(*PPV), is the most destructive disease to plum trees, being estimated that about 70 percent of the trees in Romania are infected. The virus-resistant plum variety "*HoneySweet*" was developed as part of the project funded jointly by United States and European research public institutions. Despite all the funds allocated into this direction and the positive results achieved over the years, limited consideration was given to seeking authorization for placing the final product on the market. In the United States, "*HoneySweet"* has been evaluated by the USDA Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS), the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA), and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and was found to be safe for the environment and equivalent to plums currently available to consumers.

Bucharest: Forum on Agricultural Sustainability – platform for a live dialogue

The Forum on Agricultural Sustainability was organized in partnership with the Embassy of Argentina and with the support of local biotechnology providers, Monsanto, Pioneer, and Syngenta. The Diplomat, an English language magazine, was the event coordinator, who advertised broadly the conference through their website. US Embassy Charge D'Affairs, Duane Butcher, opened the event along with the Secretary of State Valentin Soneriu from the Ministry of Agriculture and the Ambassador of the Argentine Republic Claudio Perez Paladino. In his opening remarks, the Charge highlighted the fact that "the resources available to agriculture, such as land, water, and soil nutrients, are become scarcer and more expensive; farmers are also facing competition for these resources from other uses, such as urban development and direct human consumption". The Charge continued further noting that "in order to produce more with less in a changing environment, Romanian producers, as well as American and other producers of the world, must become more innovative, and be willing to examine every tool and every technology available to ensure that productivity is increased in a sustainable manner."

Dr. Ralph Scorza, the U.S. conference speaker from USDA/ARS gave a presentation on the global status of agricultural biotechnology and specific research on plum-pox, the common virus decimating stone fruits in Romania and other EU member states. During the first part of his speech, Dr. Scorza showed the correlation between the U.S. science-based regulatory approach and the safeness of bioengineered events from a feed, food, and environmental standpoint, and demonstrated the economic advantages accrued along the food and agricultural chain, from producer to consumer.

The second part of Dr. Scorza's presentation, genetic improvement in plum trees, captivated the participants, as they had mostly linked biotechnology to field crops only. Further, the audience was impressed by the different approach the US takes with regards to fighting diseases. The United States takes a preventive approach making its defensive system capable of fighting viruses the instant they emerge, while the traditional approach practiced in many countries remains to start developing defensive tools after harm is recorded, at tremendous cost to farmers, communities, and consumers. Participants were intrigued by the fact that solutions exist for various diseases, but are ignored, despite the public funds allocated for their development.

Dr. Scorza also stated the characteristics expected by an entity seeking product authorization from any regulatory system: transparency, clarity, predictability, which EU system lacks. This statement served as a response to one of the questions posed by a farm leader regarding the reasons behind Monsanto's summer 2013 decision to withdraw its cultivation dossier for bioengineered soybean.

Opening Session, Agricultural Sustainability Conference, Bucharest, Sept. 10, 2013; Duane Butcher, Charge D'Affairs of US Embassy, delivering remarks

Opening Session, Agricultural Sustainability Conference, Bucharest, Sept. 10, 2013

Dr. Ralph Scorza, USDA/ARS, delivering the Plum Genetic Improvement presentation

Audience addressing questions to speakers

Former Agricultural Minister, Valeriu Tabara, expressing appreciation for Dr. Scorza's research

Dr. Ralph Scorza, USDA/ARS, responding to questions from audience

Bucharest and Bistrita: Two Roundtables – one approach

Apart from the large forum held in the morning, FAS Bucharest organized jointly with the Academy of Agricultural Science a separate round-table where Dr. Scorza delivered to the audience a more detailed

presentation on *HoneySweet* Plum Resistant to Sharka from the perspective of the agricultural research conducted by ARS in the United States. Dr. Ioan Zagrai, with Romania's counterpart research organization, shared with the audience the outcomes on Plum-Pox Virus (PPV) plum research in Romania.

Dr. Scorza informed participants on the manner in which the United States conducts the application and authorization processes. The key message was that the overall process is viewed more as a cooperation between the applicant and Government, where both sides recognize each other as partners with the same goal: to provide safe food to consumers while protecting the environment and economic well-being of the producer.

Dr. Scorza recommended that Romania should make more efforts in defending its interests and identifying allies that could provide support on biotechnology in general. In the Romanian farmers' view, the support they could get from other member states is limited as there are only few countries which have favorable conditions for certain biotech crop cultivation (for instance soy), hence limited attention. One of the round-table attendees viewed the upcoming Transatlantic Trade Investment Partnership (TTIP) to be negotiated between US and EU as a way to improve the EU's current regulatory approval system.

Referring to the plum-pox project, Dr. Scorza recommended that in order to increase the project's likelihood for approval, Romania and other EU member states would need to show their support. Dr. Scorza further encouraged Romanian authorities to expand cooperation with Czech and French research organizations in order to generate broader support for this project. He stressed the importance for the voice of fruits growers to be heard given their beneficiary status from a successful project.

Fruit Research Station Bistrita, a major partner of ARS/USDA, hosted a round-table in Bistrita. Fruits growers, local Government officials, researchers from the northern part of the country created a live atmosphere after the speaker delivered the presentation. Unlike the roundtable in Bucharest, where the discussion was more focused on the research results and next steps for approval, in Bistrita fruits growers' more pragmatic view emerged with their focus on business profitability. A few of their questions focused on pricing information for *HoneySweet* plum seedlings in the United States and expected availability of the PPV resistant variety on the Romanian market.

All the materials presented during the events were translated into Romanian language and distributed electronically and in hard copy to attendees. The U.S. Embassy posted the opening remarks and conference photos the same day on its website (http://romania.usembassy.gov/policy/charge/pr-09192013.html)

Results and Outcomes

FAS Bucharest believes that such outreach activities contribute to maintaining an open attitude to biotechnology and that the activity conducted in September 2013 enhanced the dialogue about the safety of biotechnology. Conference audience included in Romania local Government officials, key members

of the Parliament, researchers, farmers, livestock producers, grains traders, and media. Dr. Scorza was able to explain complex technological concepts in an understandable and engaging way. At the close of the forum, attendees spoke very highly about the quality of the presentations and the understandability of the presentation content. Input gathered from these events will be used for designing future strategic goals.

Inspired by anti-biotech groups, members of the Romanian Parliament occasionally propose legislation with the purpose to place a barrier to the technology. This was also the case this year when one of the parliamentarians submitted an initiative to ban both import and cultivation of biotech-enhanced crops. The Senate rejected the draft bill in May 2013 and the initiative moved for debate within the lower House. At the end of September 2013, the Chamber of Deputies debated and rejected the initiative to ban biotech products (import and cultivation), preserving access to the market for imported US soybeans (29 million USD in 2012). Local corn farmers continue to have access to biotech-enhanced corn seeds, should they intend to cultivate.

Among the quantitative indicators which may measure the activity conducted in Romania, we can enumerate:

Number of participating US companies/local representatives in Romania – The largest two US seed companies, Monsanto and Pioneer, partnered in the organization of the conference in Bucharest. FAS Bucharest worked closely with their local representatives throughout the organizational process. Mr. Macy Merriman, Senior Government Affairs Manager, Europe, DuPont Pioneer delivered the presentation "Plenish® high oleic soy: the first biotech soybean product with consumer nutrition benefits", while Mr. Eugen Diaconu, Field Operation Lead Monsanto Romania spoke about "Using efficiently each drop of water."

Number of event attendees in Romania – In total, more than 120 participants attended the agribusiness forum hosted in Bucharest including local Government officials, researchers, academics, farmers, grains traders, and media, while the round-tables hosted by the Academy of Agricultural Science and Fruits Research Unit in Bistrita were attended by a total of 40 participants.

Number of contacts made during the events – USDA representatives met a significant number of contacts from various fields, such as seeds production, agricultural economy research, fruits production etc. during all events. Contacts established previously strengthened with this occasion.

Number of media representatives attending the event – The agricultural sustainability forum in Romania was largely attended not only by specialized agricultural media but also general media representatives, among which the public national TV channel TVR 1 and the business channel Money TV, daily newspapers and news press agencies.

Media coverage of the event with influence in raising awareness – Print and specialized press coverage of the Romanian agricultural forum was recognized as balanced. The event generated dozens of articles (please see Appendix 1 for a full list). The national public television channel "TVR 1" dedicated a substantial part of their 90 minutes agricultural weekly show, titled "Viata Satului" ("Rural Life") to the

agricultural sustainability forum in Romania. In Bistrita, USDA speaker was the subject to "Interview of the day" for one of the local TV station, lasting 15 minutes.

Recommendations/Follow-up Evaluations

Similar future events on biotechnology would consolidate this year's activities and would likely result in more trade-friendlier approaches to any future proposed legislation to ban cultivation and importation of bioengineered plants and products. At the time of proposing new activities, FAS Bucharest will again seek the partnership of other organizations, which have similar objectives, in order to increase the efficiency and the visibility of its actions.

Specifically on *Honey-Sweet* project, FAS Bucharest will follow up with the Agricultural Science Academy and its satellite fruit research institutes for developing a Fact Sheet in Romanian language that would serve an educational purpose. FAS Bucharest jointly with the FAS Prague will facilitate the communication between the Romanian and Czech authorities and research bodies regarding the EFSA application on plum-pox.