

Kenyan scientists in biotech maize field trial

Nairobi, Kenya, 05/30 - Scientists at the Kenya Agricultural Research Institute (KARI) have for the first time in the country`s history of agricultural research planted biotechnology-derived maize in a field trial.

The trial of the maize variety, which is resistant to stem borer, is undertaken by the Insect Resistant Maize for Africa (IRMA) project, a joint research project of KARI and the International Maize and Wheat Improvement Center (CIMMYT) supported by the Syngenta Foundation for Sustainable Agriculture and the Rockefeller Foundation.

The pilot exercise was performed late Saturday at KARI-Kiboko Field Station near Machakos town, Eastern Kenya, in an open quarantine site and witnessed by local agriculturists, scientists and environmentalists.

Dr Stephen Mugo, one of the brains behind the project, says the success of the undertaking would reduce maize loss resulting from destruction by the stem borer, which accounts for 40,000 tonnes of maize annually.

This destruction, which amounts to about 13 per cent of the annual cereal loss, Mugo told journalists, translates to some 5.6 billion Kenya shillings, nearly the total amount required to import maize annually. (US\$1=76 Kshs).

The researcher said the newly introduced maize variety could help improve on Kenya`s food security and bolster farm incomes given that maize was a staple food for the local people.

He, however, added that this would only be ascertained after about four years of trials and crossbreeding with the local varieties.

"It will only be after rigorous trials which might take three to four years that the transgenic-derived maize will be allowed to be planted by farmers outside the fields for consumption," Mugo indicated.

He said in developing the genetically modified varieties, "great emphasis has been put on adherence to biosafety procedures" that have been developed and approved by the National Bio-safety Committee (NBC), which is coordinated by the National Council for Science and Technology.

Mugo noted that this measure was to ensure that only material that is totally safe for human consumption and animal feed enters the food system, and that plants have no deleterious effect on the environment.