GM Crop expansion limited in 2009 â€“ reduction in EU

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February 23, 2010 - The latest data on GM crops around the world, from the industry-funded group ISAAA, reveals that seven out of 25 countries had reduced GM cultivation areas in 2009 and another remained static. Furthermore, no new countries grew GM crops during this period and GM Cultivation in Europe dropped more than 10%. On the day of the release of annual industry-sponsored figures, a new report from Friends of the Earth International ‘Who Benefits from GM Crops’ reveals that claims made by the biotech industry that genetically modified (GM) crops can combat climate change are both exaggerated and premature.

The combined area of all GM crops in 2009 covered just 2.7% of all agricultural land. [2] Very little of this production went directly to feed people, as most went into animal feed (GM maize, soy and canola), industrial scale biofuels (GM maize, soy and canola) or to produce cotton.

The expansion of GM maize in Brazil alone accounted for over 60% of the 9 million hectares increase in GM cultivation area in 2009. In seven other countries the area under GM crops actually fell in 2009 (compared with 2008), including two of what ISAAA describe as "mega" countries:

- China's GM cultivation area was down 3%;
- Paraguay’s GM cultivation area was down 19%.

The only other country with significant growth in area was India, where Bt cotton cultivation expanded. However the biotech industry received a major setback recently when the Indian government placed a moratorium on the approval of GM Bt brinjal (aubergine) for commercial production pending further scientific assessment on safety and cross pollination. The decision followed months of mass protests throughout the country. [3]

Globally the same six countries continue to dominate GM cropping: US, Brazil, Argentina, India, Canada and China grew nearly 95% of all GM crops, while the remaining production area in 20 other countries remains low. One crop, GM herbicide tolerant soybeans (mostly Monsanto’s Roundup Ready), accounted for 52% of all GM crops. In all, GM soybeans, maize, cotton and canola accounted for over 99% of all plantings, demonstrating that no new GM crops have been adopted on any scale since GM crops were first grown commercially.

The US grew the highest number of different types of GM. However, deregulation of GM herbicide tolerant alfalfa and GM sugar beet have both been suspended by US courts because of the failure of the US Environmental Protection Agency [4] to conduct an environmental impact assessment on the crops.

The ISAAA report fails to assess weed resistance to glyphosate, which has become a major problem in GM herbicide tolerant crops in North and South America. [5] More weed killers are being used to combat this problem, and in the US the total of amount of herbicide used each year has increased since GMHT crops were introduced in 1996. [6]

In Europe, the majority of GM maize (the only crop approved for cultivation) was again grown in Spain, but there was a 4% fall in the area grown in 2009. Figures given by ISAAA for the EU reveal that the area fell in five out of seven of the principal maize growing regions in Spain in 2009 [7] – a decline that began in some regions in 2004.

Elsewhere in Europe the area of GM maize fell for the second year in a row:

- Germany's GM cultivation (where a ban was introduced in 2009) was down 100%;
- The Czech Republic's GM cultivation was down 31%;
- Romania's GM cultivation was down 57%;
- Slovakia's GM cultivation was down 54%.

The area in Poland under GM remained static in 2009. Five other EU countries have banned the cultivation of Monsanto's GM maize. [8] Environmental NGO Friends of the Earth states that in Europe, the area planted with GM crops has decreased for the fifth year in a row – a reduction of more than 10% since 2008. FoE Europe thinks that this reflects continuing public and political concerns on the negative impacts of GM crops. With the introduction of the moratorium in Germany in 2009 on GM maize, the area planted in the EU with GM crops dropped under 0.05% of total agricultural land.

Friends of the Earth Europe GM spokesperson Kirtana Chandrasekaran said, “The number of fields growing GM crops in Europe continues to dwindle while at the same time more and more Europeans are demanding farming that benefits both people and the planet. European Governments would be well advised to steer clear of GM crops in tackling climate change and put their energies into boosting planet and people friendly farming instead.”

Recently published figures reveal the extent to which GM crops are being converted to biofuels rather than used to feed people. In 2008 12.2 million hectares of GM crops in the US were used for biofuels (19.5% of total US GM area and 10% of the global GM area). [9] The majority of this was from the conversion of maize into bio-ethanol. GM maize and soya production in Latin America is also being used to produce biofuels, but detailed data are not available.

Africa remains an unreceptive area for GM crops with only three countries growing any. ISAAA claim a large increase in Bt cotton area in Burkina Faso. However, the Bt cotton seed price in Burkino Faso is reported to exceed the total input costs of non-GM cotton farmers in other parts of West Africa [10] by more than a third. A recent study of GM Bt cotton crops presented strong evidence that many poorer farmers had "been bypassed altogether" and were not benefitting from using GM seed. [11]

The percentage of smaller farmers growing GM crops remains very low at 2.75% of the 513 million [12] around the world. Via Campesina – the global network representing small and peasant farmers – has rejected GM crops. [13]

Commenting Pete Riley of GM Freeze said: "The world continues to demand and rely on non-GM crops, with more than 97% of farmland producing non-GM food. Meanwhile the GM industry continues mainly to produce animal feed and biofuels. The lack of labelling of food products from GM fed animals has left the majority of people in the world in the dark and enabled the trade in GM soybeans and maize for animal feed to continue.

"The ISAAA report reveals that in many countries the appeal of GM crops is waning, and the growth they claim is heavily dependent on a handful of countries. Claims that GM crops are benefitting poor farmers do not stand up to close scrutiny.

"What the world needs is a rethink about how we apply our money and brain power. We need to shift away from expensive GM models geared to intensive, high carbon production systems towards agroecological methods that use local natural resources and harness the combined knowledge of farmers and scientists to produce crops without wrecking the planet."

On the day of the release of annual industry-sponsored figures, a new report from Friends of the Earth International reveals that claims made by the biotech industry that genetically modified (GM) crops can combat climate change are both exaggerated and premature. [14]

The report, ‘Who Benefits from GM Crops ’, examines the evidence for these claims, and exposes that GM crops could actually increase carbon emissions while failing to feed the world. This is because GM crops are responsible for huge increases in the use of pesticides in the US and South America, intensifying fossil fuel use. The cultivation of GM soy to feed factory farmed animals is also contributing to widespread deforestation in South America. [15]

The report also exposes that globally GM crops remain confined to less than 3% of agricultural land and more than 99% are grown for animal feed and agrofuels, rather than food.

Ongoing concerns about the negative impacts of GM crops means many Governments are still cautious about adopting them. India has placed a moratorium on the planting of its first GM food crop due to widespread concerns on its health, environmental and socio-economic impact.

Friends of the Earth follow a smiliar line of analysis as GM Freeze: "Despite many decades of research there is still not a single commercial GM crop with increased yield, drought-tolerance, salt-tolerance, enhanced nutrition or other beneficial traits long promised by biotech companies. [16] GM crops also hinder the development of real solutions to hunger and climate change by starving them of funding and restricting the access of farmers to seeds and knowledge. Ecological farming and traditional knowledge have been identified as the key to facing future challenges." [17]

Sources
presse release GM Freeze, 23 February 2010
presse release Friends of the Earth Europe

For more information on the chain of destruction stretching from factory farms in Europe to the forests of South America:
Soy-section of this website
http://www.feedingfactoryfarms.org/ (incl. de documentary Killing Fields)
http://lasojamata.iskra.net

Notes

1. ISAAA (International Service for the Acquisition of Ag-biotech Applications), Brief No 41, Global status of Commercialized Biotech/GM Crops 2009. ISAAA "shares the benefits of crop biotechnology to various stakeholders, particularly resource-poor farmers in developing countries, through knowledge sharing initiatives and the transfer and delivery of proprietary biotechnology applications". ISAAA is funded by the major biotech companies, industry bodies and USAID and USDA (see http://www.isaaa.org/inbrief/donors/default.asp). The current report is sponsored by two banks: Fondazione Bussolera in Branca, Italy and Ibercaja in Spain.

2. According to ISAAA GM crops occupied 134 million hectares in 2009. This is out of total area of agricultural land of over 4.9 billion hectares (source FAO).

3. See http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/india/7196372/India-drops-GM-food-plans.html

4. See http://www.ca9.uscourts.gov/datastore/opinions/2009/06/24/07-16458.pdf
and http://www.earthjustice.org/library/legal_docs/9-21-09-order.pdf

5. See http://www.gmfreeze.org/uploads/resistance_short_final.pdf

6. See http://www.organic-center.org/science.pest.php?action=view&report_id=159

7. See table 36 of ISAAA report. In some areas the appeal of GM crops started to wane several years ago – in Madrid the area has fallen by 90% since a peak in 2004, and in Castilla-La-Mancha by 62% in the same period.

8. France, Germany, Austria, Greece, Hungary and Luxemburg have banned Monsanto’s Bt maize MON810 because of health and environmental concerns.

9. See http://checkbiotech.org/node/27660

10. See http://www.grain.org/research/contamination.cfm?id=84

11. Glover, D, 2009. Underlying promise: Agricultural Biotechnology’s Pro-Poor Narrative Ten Years on. STEPS Centre, University of Sussex.

12. Von Braum, J, 2008. Poverty, Climate Change, Rising Food Prices and Small farmers. Presentation to the International Fund for Agricultural Development Rome, April 2008. See
www.ifad.org/gbdocs/repl/8/ii/e/presentations/IFAD_21-04-08.pps

13. See http://www.viacampesina.org/main_en/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=721&Itemid=37

14. The Friends of the Earth International report: ‘Who Benefits from GM Crops’

15. Recent US Department of Agriculture data has shown that in 2008, GM crops in the US required over 26% more kilograms of pesticides per hectare than conventional varieties. A 2007 study by a Brazilian governmental agency found that the use of glyphosate increased 80 per cent from 2000 to 2005. In Argentina, more than two hundred thousand hectares of native forest disappear every year, mainly due to the expansion of GM soy plantations.

16. 99% of biotech agriculture consists of four crops with just two traits, herbicide-tolerance and/or insect-resistance. The vast majority of GM crops in the pipeline are also herbicide tolerant or insect resistant crops.

17. UNEP, 2008 Organic Agriculture and Food Security in Africa. See
http://www.unctad.org/en/docs/ditcted200715_en.pdf
IAASTD, 2008 Agriculture at a Crossroads Key findings, See
http://www.agassessment.org/reports/IAASTD/EN/Agriculture%20at%20a%20Crossroad
s_Global%20Summary%20for%20Decision%20Makers%20(English).pdf