

## Open Letter to Minister Tina Joemat-Pettersson

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## MONSANTO'S GM Crop Failures in South Africa Still a Mystery

In April 2009, the African Centre for Biosafety (ACB) learnt that three of Monsanto's genetically modified (GM) maize varieties had failed to pollinate, leaving up to 200 000 hectares of mielie fields barren across several provinces. We were informed that the varieties that flopped were Monsanto's MON 810, NK 603 and its stacked GM maize MON 810 x NK 603. The ACB is of the view that the matter has not been dealt with sufficiently by the Executive Council, the GM regulatory body in South Africa that approved these three events in the first place, nor has the public been sufficiently informed of the EC's final decision on the matter.

Monsanto was quick to compensate farmers for crop losses, paying out \$42 million,<sup>i</sup> but gagged the farmers from speaking to the media by locking them into non-disclosure agreements. At the time, Monsanto blamed the breeding process for the crop failure and losses, stating the following:

"In order to maximize seed production yields during the 2007 seed production, the male and female inbreds of these three hybrids were reversed. This process of reversing the male and female is a common practice in hybrid production that existed before the advent of biotechnology. In this situation, the three hybrids produced using the same female inbred have experienced variable pollen production. Monsanto teams have reviewed the seed production method for the three hybrids and will make the necessary changes to ensure good pollinating hybrids in the future."<sup>ii</sup>

In Monsanto's 3- page report submitted to the GMO Registrar, they confirm their position that the crop failure was due to "the genetics of the female used in the production process of the three varieties" as well as an "unprecedented combination of environmental conditions".<sup>iii</sup>

Information contained in the minutes of the May 2009 meeting of the Executive Council has now brought a brand new issue to light: that the crop failures "may have resulted from incorrect spraying regimes being implemented".<sup>iv</sup> This new issue is not reflected in any of Monsanto's reports accessed by the ACB. Although plant material has been collected by Monsanto and will be subject to further scientific analysis by them, the Department of Agriculture now deems the issue closed. Despite having carried out no investigation of its own and the apparent contradiction that its own minutes

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have noted, the Department remains of the opinion that a mistake in the breeding process, not the genetic engineering of the varieties, is to blame for the crop failures.

Farmers and citizens want clarity from the authorities on what exactly has gone wrong, based on an independent scientific investigation. Farmers' groups throughout Africa have also been awaiting a credible explanation of the crop failures.

A number of concerns arise from this incident:

- The Department of Agriculture is not showing sufficient capacity or political will to monitor GMOs released into the environment, preferring to allow industry to regulate itself;
- The Department of Agriculture has not seen fit to publicise an official explanation of the failures or explained to the public the process that was followed in the resolution of this matter.
- Only Monsanto has had access to the affected plant material and farmers have been barred from speaking out about the crop failure and the compensation they have received;
- Although Monsanto compensated commercial farmers for their losses, what will happen in the event of crop failures occurring on the fields of small-scale farmers who are now trapped into growing GM varieties?

The handling of this matter has not engendered public faith in the regulation of GMOs, an already highly contentious technology. The ACB requests that the Executive Council publicise the biosafety procedures followed in reaching their final decision on the crop failures and the scientific basis upon which they have come to their decision. Public support for such an explanation is steadily growing at: <http://www.activist.co.za/campaigns/2009/investigatem.php>. We reiterate our demands for a ban on all GMOs.

## References

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<sup>i</sup> Gillam, C. 2 April 2009. **Monsanto pays S. Africa farmers over corn concerns**. Thomson Reuters. <http://www.reuters.com/article/rbssIndustryMaterialsUtilitiesNews/idUSN0220100420090402> (accessed 20 September 2009)

<sup>ii</sup> Monsanto. 2 April 2009. **White maize in South Africa**. [http://www.monsanto.com/monsanto\\_today/for\\_the\\_record/south\\_africa\\_gm\\_corn.asp](http://www.monsanto.com/monsanto_today/for_the_record/south_africa_gm_corn.asp) (accessed 10 November 2009)

<sup>iii</sup> Wessels, W. Monsanto Regulatory Affairs Manager, Sub-Sahara Africa. 31 March 2009. **Further Report on Maize Hybrids Containing the NK603 Event**.

<sup>iv</sup> Minutes of the Meeting of the Executive Council under the GMO Act 1997, held on 12 May 2009. <http://www.nda.agric.za/daDev/sideMenu/biosafety/doc/ECminutes12May2009.pdf> (accessed 10 November 2009)