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Global Biotech Area Surges Past 100 Million Hectares on 13 Percent Growth
Study predicts 200 million hectares, 20 million farmers by 2015

DELHI, INDIA – (January 18, 2007) Farmers continued rapid adoption of biotech crops around the globe in 2006 driving multiple adoption milestones for the technology-enhanced crops that produce greater yields of food, feed, fiber and fuel, according to an annual report released today by the International Service for the Acquisition of Agri-Biotech Applications (ISAAA).

At the beginning of the second decade of biotech crop adoption, biotech crop area jumped 12 million hectares or 13 percent to reach 102 million hectares, breaking the 100 million-hectare mark for the first time and achieving the second highest growth in the past 5 years. Growth for the period 1996 to 2006 is equivalent to an unprecedented 60-fold increase, the highest adoption rate of any crop technology. Additionally, the number of farmers planting biotech crops surged past 10 million for the first time, to 10.3 million, from 8.5 million farmers in 2005.

Clive James, chairman and founder of ISAAA and author of the report, expects these adoption levels to continue accelerating throughout the second decade of commercialization. By 2015, ISAAA predicts more than 20 million farmers will plant 200 million hectares of biotech crops in about 40 countries.

“More than 90 percent or 9.3 million farmers growing biotech crops last year were small, resource-poor farmers from the developing world, allowing biotechnology to make a modest contribution to the alleviation of their poverty,” James said. “Millions of small, resource-poor farmers will turn to the potential biotech crops offer in the next decade.”

In fact, the report indicated that the growth of biotech crop adoption was substantially higher in the developing world at 21 percent versus the industrialized nations where adoption grew 9 percent. Developing countries now account for 40 percent of the global biotech crop area.

Ravinder Brar, a widowed mother of two and biotech cotton farmer in India says developing world farmers need the increased production and income biotech crops offer, as well as the environmental and time-saving benefits.

“My biotech crops have reduced spraying costs and resulted in higher yields. I expect biotech crops to increase my profits, providing a better life for my family,” she said.

C.D. Mayee, ISAAA trustee and chairman of India's Agricultural Scientists Recruitment Board, confirms Brar's comments. "Bt cotton has contributed significantly to the yield increase in cotton in India from 308 kg lint per hectare in 2001-2002 to 450 kg lint per hectare in 2005-2006. In turn the increase in yield from Bt cotton has been a major contributor to increased cotton exports from India which soared from 0.9 million bales in 2005 to 4.7 million bales in 2006, the highest ever recorded for India."

These benefits are driving widespread growth of biotech crops globally. In 2006, there were key growth centers on each of the major continents providing a broad and stable foundation for biotech crops in the second decade. Furthermore, while 22 countries planted biotech crops last year, the report indicated an additional 29 countries have approved biotech crops for import for food/feed use and release into the environment.

"More than half of the global population of 6.5 billion people now live in countries where biotech crops are grown, allowing 3.6 billion people to benefit from the economic, societal and environmental advantages generated through biotech crops," James said. "With 51 countries in total gaining experience with biotech crops, acceptance will continue to grow."

Key Growth Centers

The Americas: The United States continues to drive growth in North America and globally, accounting for the greatest absolute acreage increase in 2006 with the addition of 4.8 million hectares. Brazil leads growth in South America with an increase of 22 percent to total 11.5 million hectares of soybeans and biotech cotton, the latter commercialized for the first time in 2006.

Asia: India is emerging as a key leader in Asia. The country tallied the most substantial percentage increase at 192 percent or 2.5 million hectares to total 3.8 million hectares, jumping two spots in the world ranking to become the fifth largest producer of biotech crops in the world, surpassing China for the first time.

Africa: South Africa made significant strides in the past year to lead the African continent forward by almost tripling its biotech crop area. Notably, the gain came from Bt white maize, primarily used for food, and Bt yellow maize used for livestock feed.

Europe: Growth also continues in the countries of the EU where Slovakia became the sixth EU country out of 25 to plant biotech crops. Spain continues to lead the continent, planting 60,000 hectares in 2006; however, the other five EU countries reported a five-fold increase in plantings from 1,500 hectares in 2005 to about 8,500 hectares in 2006.

Future Growth Drivers

ISAAA predicts this growth to continue in the second decade of commercialization with significant opportunities in multiple geographic areas.

“The commercialization of biotech rice alone could drive adoption of biotech crops well beyond the conservative estimate of 20 million farmers up to 80 million farmers. This is based on an adoption rate of one third by the world’s 250 million rice farmers, most of whom are small resource-poor farmers, 90 percent of whom are in Asia. Biotech rice with insect resistance to enhance yields could make a substantial impact on the UN Millennium Development goal of reducing poverty by half by 2015, and golden rice with enhanced vitamin A could improve nutrition significantly,” James said.

Biofuels will also be a major growth driver. Biotech crops will be used to increase the efficiency and meet added demand for alternative energy, as well as exploring biotech options to bring cellulose-based ethanol from energy crops to market. Biotech crops can play a key role in meeting increased demands for food and fuel. Further, biotech crops with drought-tolerant traits are expected to reach the market within the next five years, unlocking substantial production opportunities in dryer climates.

While the Americas led the first decade of biotech crop adoption, the second decade will likely feature significant growth in Asia and its developing countries of India, China and the Philippines, as well as new biotech countries like Pakistan and Vietnam. In Africa, the experiences of South Africa will likely lead other countries to begin planting biotech crops, including Egypt, Burkina Faso and Kenya where promising field trials have already been conducted. Finally, the consistent global increase in adoption of biotech crops will likely prove to be a trend that merits increased recognition by the EU. France, as a leading member state, is a key example, increasing its area of Bt maize multi-fold to 5,000 hectares in 2006.

“We are at an exciting time in biotechnology’s adoption,” James said. “As we look into the future at the second decade of commercialization, many factors are poised to drive substantial growth of biotech crops well beyond the early adopters. It is in this decade that biotech crops can make a significant contribution and impact on the world’s 1.3 billion poor.”

The report is co-sponsored by the Rockefeller Foundation, a U.S.-based philanthropic organization associated with the Green Revolution that saved up to a billion lives in the 1960s, and Ibercaja, one of the largest Spanish banks headquartered in the maize growing region of Spain. For more information or the executive summary, log on to www.isaaa.org.

The International Service for the Acquisition of Agri-biotech Applications (ISAAA) is a not-for-profit organization with an international network of centers designed to contribute to the alleviation of hunger and poverty by sharing knowledge and crop biotechnology applications. Clive James, chairman and founder of ISAAA, has lived and/or worked for the past 25 years in the developing countries of Asia, Latin America and Africa, devoting his efforts to agricultural research and development issues with a focus on crop biotechnology and global food security.