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"Society's acceptance of GM technology is critical"

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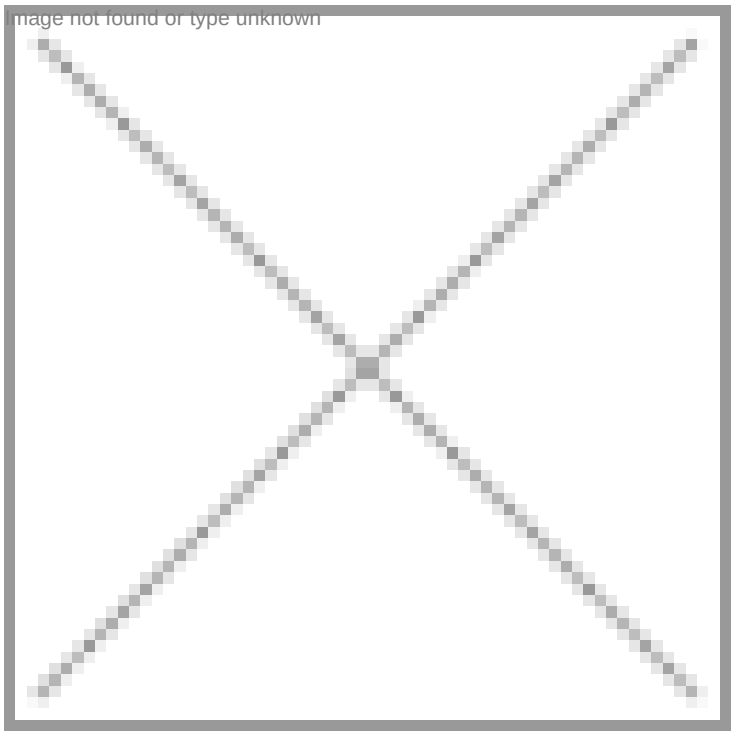

"Society's acceptance of GM technology is critical"

-Benigno D Pecson, president and CEO of Biotechnology Coalition of the Philippines

What is the mandate of the Biotechnology Coalition of the Philippines?

The Biotechnology Coalition of the Philippines was set up with the support of the Philippines government. Unlike in India, we do not have a department of biotechnology per se. So the government wanted a structured body to boost the biotechnology developments in the country.

The coalition was officially launched in April 2001, although it existed since 1997 as the Biotechnology Association of the Philippines, Inc. (BAPI). Prior to this, in the mid Nineties, the Department of Trade and Industry (DTI) was looking after both the information technology and biotechnology segments. BAPI was organized under the auspices of DTI to improve the commercial capacity of biotechnology-based products.

Subsequently, in 2001, to include and give significance to membership from the agricultural biotechnology sector, the organization was expanded and the Biotechnology Coalition of the Philippines was formed.

In fact, we are the first country after China to grow genetically modified food. In 2004 we had already planted genetically modified corn in over 50,000 hectares. We are probably the only country in Asia which produces GM food in large quantities.

We, as an organization, coordinate in helping and promoting the growth of biotechnology in the country. We have scientists, companies and organizations as our members, which are the predominant stakeholders in the biotechnology domain.

Which varieties of GM corn are being planted in the Philippines and from where was the technology sourced? How has the performance of GM corn been compared to conventional corn?

The technology was sourced from Monsanto. They sell the seeds to our farmers along with another company called Pioneer Hybrid. The first type of corn which came in the country was resistant to lepidopteron insects, Bt corn. And then we also have corn resistant to herbicides. Thus we have insect resistant and herbicide resistant corn, and both of them are approved for planting. Hence the increase in yield has been even more.

Since we did not develop the technology on our own, we bought it and so the cost of seeds is high. But even then the advantage to the farmer is significant. Although the seed price is high, the farmer is guaranteed of a good harvest. This is unlike in a regular crop, where in the absence of the latest technology, the farmer may lose up to 90 percent of the crop. The national yield average for corn is the 2.65 tons per hectare per harvest, but with the Bt corn, the farmer can expect anywhere between 4-9 tons per hectare per harvest. In fact one of our farmers got an award because he got a record-breaking yield of 10.25 tons per hectare, which is substantial. At present, Philippines imports half a million metric tons of corn, and if we are able to increase the acreage of GM corn substantially, then a time will come when we may not have to import corn.

What have been the Coalition's contributions to the agribiotech sector?

In the Philippines, we had our own GM regulatory system and one of the things that our organization did was to put together a regulatory system which permits the table vision of the genetically modified food, as people are still averse to the idea of genetically modified crops, particularly as food. So we trained people in the department of agriculture, gave them equipment and several organizations helped them get training to evaluate one crop.

Are you planning to expand the GM experience to other crops as well?

Yes definitely. We are working on it. The next transgenic crop that we will have includes papaya resistant to the ring spot virus, which should be coming out in a few years. This is being done in association with Australia. We are also working on delayed ripening of papayas. We are working on genetically modified eggplant in association with an Indian company. Then we are working on some other crops like sweet potato in co-operation with the Cornell University. Within the Philippines, in-house research is also being done on important fruit crops like coconut and mango. Golden rice enriched with beta-carotene will be in the markets soon. And we are also working on another kind of transgenic rice, which is resistant to a specific local disease.

What are the different challenges that the organization faces?

The biggest challenge is the reluctance of people to accept the technology, particularly if it is in food. But the very fact that we were able to plant GM corn in over 50,000 hectares emphatically tells the public that it is safe. So it is really the society's acceptance for technology, which matters. It is important that the society should understand the issues, because if they do not, the technology will never take off.

In our case, we had difficulty with the religious groups and we also had to educate our legislators. We went to a lot of the meetings in the senate and the congress to explain what biotechnology is all about.

Rolly Dureha