

GM Seeds: Biowarfare in Brazil

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Biosafety Bill signed. Battle over transgenic continues

After the law comes into force, it begins the time when the society must stay alert for the composition of the new CTNBio

Brazil's President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva had just signed the Biosafety Bill establishing the regulatory process for the approval of biotech crops. The battle over transgenics will continue, though, through the mobilization of environmentalists and consumer defense groups. The bill is also being analysed to check potential channels for legal action.

The new Biosafety Law, signed on March 24, will replace the one adopted in 1995 and will make it easier to acquire authorization for planting genetically modified crops, as well as authorizing embryonic stem cell research for treatment purposes. The combination of these two rather disparate issues in a single piece of legislation reflects the tortuous road traveled by the Bill.

According to the public letter released by non-governmental organizations, criticizing the act of the President, the inclusion of research with embryonic stem cells on the text of the law was a "smoke screen" used in favor of the transgenic lobbying campaign, in a way to distract the public opinion on the implications of GMOs.

The issue of transgenics was overlooked in these lobbying efforts. The Biosafety Bill grants full power to authorize the research and commercial liberation of GMOs to the National Technical Committee on Biosafety (CTNBio). According to the new law, the Committee can freely adopt decisions without prior consulting to the Ministry of the Environment or even the health authorities responsible for studying the potential threat of genetic modified organisms posed to human health.

Another aggravating circumstance is that CTNBio had already demonstrated its commitment to promoting biotechnology, not biosafety, not only by the composition of its members, most of them dedicated to the development of GMOs, but also on situations such as the one occurred less than a week later of the approval of the law by the Deputies Chamber, when the Committee rushed and called together an extraordinary assembly to deliberate on the request of Monsanto to liberate a variety of genetic modified cotton. The demand was approved, of course, when the law wasn't even into practice, as President Lula had not signed it yet.

A few days before the ratification of the law, the ministries of Health and Environment tried a last shot and suggested a list of rejection to some articles of the Bill, focused mainly on the absolute power of CTNBio. As it was expected, President Lula did not accept them. However, there was some “courtesy” of him to these two ministries by making a change on the original text which foresees that the minimum quantity of members to approve the requests of researches and liberations of transgenic was only eight from a group of 27. According to the new law, this number is not yet settled, but the tendency is that it won't be less than half of the total.

Another shift concerns to the article that had established a fixed term for the National Council on Biosafety (CNB, in Portuguese) to decide on processes forwarded to this body, responsible to analyse cases that were not a consensus at CTNBio. From now on, there will be no fixed term for this kind of decisions. Notwithstanding, the shifts granted by the president did not change the core of the law.

Even the Brazilian Society for the Science Progress (SBPC, in Portuguese) sent an alert to the public, recommending “precaution” on the commercial utilization of GMOs and stem cells. According to Ennio Candotti, president of SBPC, the society is in favor of the research with genetic modified crops, but manifests carefulness in regard to its liberation for commercial use. “Each case must be carefully analysed, taking into account the potential risks to the environment and human health”, said Candotti.

The coordinator of CTNBio, Jairon Alcir do Nascimento, already announced that the Committee intends to overcome the number of projects with genetic modified organisms analysed last year. According to him, there are already 587 requests of analysis, made since the beginning of 2004.

The inappropriate scenario calls for a mobilization around the new composition of the Committee. The society must ascertain that the new constitution of CTNBio will not continue with the abuses of the previous one, and a crucial beginning for that comes with the choice of its members, that must be experts on biosafety, not biotechnology, and must not have odd relationship with biotech companies, nor even work with transgenic researches, otherwise, their verdict will be more that compromised.

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