

London Conference Discusses the Future Of Biotechnology in Agriculture

By Michael Conlon

Since biotechnology could potentially enhance virtually every agricultural product, public concern about the technology in Europe and other parts of the world may have serious long-term implications for U.S. agricultural exports. The United Kingdom (U.K.), which has been at the forefront of such concerns, is a bellwether for European and global attitudes on agricultural biotechnology.

In the U.K., consumer apprehension over biotechnology has been fueled by a variety of causes, such as past food safety scares and the lack of reliable information about the technology. To address these concerns, the Foreign Agricultural Service in London (FAS/London), in coordination with three U.K. universities, sponsored an international conference on agricultural biotechnology called "Seeds of Opportunity: The Future of Biotechnology in Agriculture." The goal of the conference was to discuss the potential of biotechnology as it relates to health, the environment and the consumer.

More than 185 people from around the world attended, including distinguished scientists and policy makers from Europe, the United States and the developing world.

Overall, the meetings produced a lively dialogue and debate. Presenters recognized the potential of biotechnology to increase agricultural production by controlling devastating crop viruses and pests and improving the use of marginal land. Yet there was also a clear understanding that before biotechnology will be more widely accepted

in Europe and developing countries, it is essential to address public concerns and fears.

Obviously the public dialogue on agricultural biotechnology is only just beginning. However, this conference highlighted some important common themes:

- The current public debate on agricultural biotechnology will be one of the key factors shaping the future direction of world agriculture.
- Given past food scares, consumers in Europe will not accept new food technologies without question.
- Biotechnology can play a critical role in expanding food production to feed the world's growing population.
- Biotechnology is just a tool, albeit a significant tool, to enhance crop productivity.
- Concerns over agricultural biotechnology in developed countries are hindering agricultural research in the developing world.
- Private companies must work more closely with public institutions on biotechnology research.
- If biotechnology test results are publicly released, these products will be more widely accepted.
- For many years, agricultural biotechnology has provided farmers with a vast number of agronomic advantages, such as improved resistance to disease and accelerated growth. However, future applications will depend on the development of crops that provide direct consumer benefits.

A Web cast of selected video highlights of the conference and transcripts of the speeches are available through the conference Web site at:

www.seedsofopportunity.com ■



AA024365

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