

Agricultural Biotechnology Assistance With a Global Reach

By Steven D. Beasley

The United States has undertaken many efforts to increase an understanding of the use of biotechnology in agriculture. This article focuses on FAS' global biotechnology training and technical assistance program, funded by the Emerging Markets Program.

Program activities—primarily technical workshops and seminars—are designed to improve understanding of the issues surrounding agricultural biotechnology in emerging markets across the globe.

The activities have fostered a more balanced discussion that can improve U.S. trade prospects and help safeguard world food security. U.S. agricultural commodities most likely to benefit from this assistance are coarse grains, soybeans, wheat, cotton, fruits and vegetables.

Program Basics

Through this program, science-based, user-friendly information on agricultural



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biotechnology is made available to key stakeholders and decision makers in important future markets for U.S. agricultural products.

Discussions focus on several overarching questions:

- What is biotechnology? What does it promise?
- Is biotechnology safe? What regulatory mechanisms are already in place in countries with well-developed biotech industries?
- What are the crucial trade issues related

to biotechnology? What are the key issues on the trade front, such as negotiations in the context of the World Trade Organization or the Codex Alimentarius, labeling and identity preservation?

- What are consumers' main concerns about biotechnology? How do you communicate with them in an objective, responsible and responsive manner?

The program has measurable goals:

- Improve the dialogue on biotechnology in targeted markets, which have much to gain from the technology.

THIS EFFORT SHOULD HELP PREVENT OR REDUCE BARRIERS AND RESTRICTIONS ON U.S. AGRICULTURAL PRODUCTS AND ENHANCE WORLD FOOD SECURITY.

2001 Accomplishments: Biotechnology Training and Technical Assistance Program

Country	Activity	Location	Timing and Significance
Mexico	Educational program, May 2001: Mexico's Health Committee legislators studying U.S. regulatory policy	Washington, DC	Event coincided with debate on legislation requiring labeling of all biotech-derived foods
Philippines	Seminar, June 2001: Over 120 attendees, two-thirds of them Philippine legislative staff	Manila	Event simultaneous with drafting of a key biotech policy statement by legislature Follow-up to include training with secondary-level educators
Chile	Seminar, September 2001: Over 130 attendees including regulators, policy makers, food industry members, scientists and media	Santiago	Event coincided with Chile's debate on biotech labeling and other policies
South Africa	Seminar, September 2001: Over 200 attendees including farmers, food industry members, regulators, policy makers and media from 17 sub-Saharan countries	Pretoria	Event stimulated discussion among stakeholders on the needs and opportunities for biotech on the continent
Peru	Seminar, October 2001: Over 100 attendees from Peru, Ecuador and Bolivia, including academics, regulators, policy makers, food industry personnel, scientists and media	Lima	Event coincided with debate on biotech crop field trials and labeling Follow-up to include training with secondary-level educators

- Foster more balanced media reports.
- Enhance the business environment for agricultural biotechnology products through the promotion of transparent, reasonable and predictable trade and regulatory procedures and policies.
- Encourage adoption of science-based trade and regulatory policies.
- Increase U.S. agricultural biotechnology exports.

Reaching Out to Critical Developing Markets

The FAS initiative supports U.S. government efforts abroad to explain agricultural biotechnology issues to political and social leaders, government regulators, importers and distributors, retailers and wholesalers, farmers, intermediate food

processors, scientists, media representatives and consumers.

In fiscal 2001, the program's coordinators launched specific technical assistance and training projects in major commercial centers in the Philippines, Chile, Peru and South Africa. In addition, they also arranged an educational program in the United States for key legislators from Mexico.

FAS geared the seminars and technical workshops to the specific issues, concerns and constraints in each region. Specific objectives typically include:

- Informing interested parties, from agribusinesses to consumers, about the benefits of agricultural biotechnology, especially those specific to their own countries. USDA has completed an information guide on the basics of bio-



technology communication, to be translated into languages of target countries, that will be useful in achieving this goal.

- Educating attendees on the benefits—such as higher yields, lower use of chemical inputs and greater insect resistance—of biotechnology crops.
- Educating interested parties on food safety standards and the U.S. regulatory system.
- Discussing the need for sound intellectual property rights protections to stimulate technological development.
- Educating regulators and scientists on the need for standardization and consistency in risk assessment.
- Heightening the awareness of foreign governments and business interests of U.S. government policy positions on agricultural biotechnology.
- Educating natural resource managers on the environmental benefits and issues related to the technology.

Project Players and Participants

The Trade and Investment Program, part of FAS' Food Industries Division in the International Cooperation and Development area, proposes and coordinates each activity, providing liaison between FAS offices, other agencies and partners in the public and private sector. The Emerging Markets Program reviews the proposals, approves the countries and provides principal funding.

FAS offices in the targeted region provide in-country support in executing the project. They help evaluate the market's informational needs, determine the composition of the target audience, acquire facilities and line up appropriate local speakers to complement expert teams from the United States.

Private corporations and associations with which FAS has established important



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**"THIS CONFERENCE WAS AN
OUTSTANDING EXAMPLE OF THE
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SYNERGISM BETWEEN
WASHINGTON, DC AND U.S.
EMBASSIES."**

**—John R. Hamilton, U.S. Ambassador,
Peru**

partnerships (such as the International Food Information Council, the International Life Sciences Institute, the American Crop Protection Association, the National Food Processors Association and the Grocery Manufacturers of America) provide advisors, educational resources and speakers. Private firms and associations routinely send

their own world-class experts to these fora and shoulder the associated costs.

U.S. government agencies—such as the U.S. Agency for International Development, the Food and Drug Administration, the Environmental Protection Agency and the Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service—also supply speakers.

Equally important, the program has attracted the co-sponsorship and participation of noted specialists and other distinguished speakers from the target countries themselves. These individuals come from universities and think tanks, from government and political sectors, from trade groups and private companies. Their participation helps ensure a locally relevant yet broad-based discussion, as well as audience acceptance of seminar content. ■

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