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Turkey

Biotechnology

Agricultural Biotechnology Annual Report

2005

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Report Highlights:
With the recent change in Turkey's Minister of Agriculture, Turkey's biosafety commission has been disbanded and draft biosafety legislation remains on hold. Stakeholders are optimistic that the development will be positive.

Includes PSD Changes: No
Includes Trade Matrix: No
Annual Report
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Executive Summary

Turkey is a major importer and processor of bulk and semi-processed commodities, and the United States is the primary supplier. U.S. exports of corn, soybeans, soybean meal, and vegetable oils to Turkey reached $225 million in CY 2004. Turkey is also a major cotton importer – U.S. cotton exports reached a record $448 million in 2004.

Turkey is also a signatory of the Biosafety Protocol, and has been in the process of drafting biosafety legislation for the past two years. The process has been delayed by significant comments from domestic stakeholders which have led to key revisions and examination of the commercial impact of the law. The recent change in the Minister of Agriculture is expected to provide new life to the development of the regulations, however it is not expected that the draft regulations will be presented to Parliament before the end of the year.

While Government officials insist that the regulations are not intended to ban food and agricultural products derived through biotechnology or otherwise restrict trade, the current version of the draft law has arduous application, liability and penal provisions that are expected to disrupt the market significantly. Of critical importance will be the nature of the transitional regulations which should allow for a continuation of trade while applications and risk assessments are reviewed.

Biotechnology Trade and Production

Turkey does not currently produce biotechnology crops. No new crops are expected to be introduced for cultivation in the near future, since the biosafety regulations will need to be passed before applications for field crop trials will be accepted. Between 1998 and 2000, there were limited field trials of corn, cotton and potatoes. After 2000, trials were halted on the basis that there was inadequate legislation to regulate the technology, and the Government of Turkey has not released any results from those field trials.

Turkey is a major importer of bulk and semi-processed commodities for use in its food and agricultural processing industries. In CY 2004 according to official statistics, Turkey imported about 1 million tons of corn, of which 678,000 MT was from the United States. Corn imports are likely to fall to around 200,000 MT per year due to increased domestic production, and increased use of feed wheat due to high domestic prices of corn (due in part to protectionist trade restrictions). In the near future, Turkey is expected to become self-sufficient in corn production as farmers switch away from traditional crops such as sugar beets, tobacco and cotton. Turkey imports about 1.1 to 1.2 million tons of soybeans (700-800 TMT) and soybean meal (400-500 TMT) per year. Turkey also imports significant amounts of corn oil. Turkey is not a recipient of any food aid.

Biotechnology Policy

All policy related to agricultural biotechnology is coordinated by the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Affairs (MARA). Since MARA has been given authority over biotechnology, there is little or no participation from the Ministry of Health or Environment outside of previously-existing interagency biosafety committees. Within MARA, the General Directorate of Research and Development (TAGEM) has had primary responsibility for participation in the Biosafety Protocol meetings and workshops and the drafting of the biosafety regulations. As a result, bureaucratic expertise in the field of agricultural biotechnology is quite limited.

As a signatory of the Cartagena Biosafety Protocol, Turkey received a fund of USD 250,000 for a United Nations Environmental Forum (UNEF) Project. The goal of the project was to assist Turkey to fulfill the responsibilities under the Cartagena Biosafety Protocol and assist Turkey to define the needs and develop a legal base for all agriculture biotechnology products, including, seed, food, feed, human and animal vaccines and antibiotics.

A steering committee was formed with the project, including several ministries (Ministries of Agriculture, Health, Environment and Forestry), other government organizations (Under secretariats of Treasury and Foreign Trade, Atomic Energy Organization), universities (Middle East Technical University, and other Colleges of Agriculture and Veterinary sciences), and many NGO's (Farmers Union, Turkish Seed Industry Association, Turkish Feed Millers Association, Biologists Association, Protection of Consumers Rights Association, etc). The steering committee was working under the secretariat of the Agricultural Research General Directorate (TAGEM) of the Ministry of Agriculture. General Directorates of Agricultural Production and Development (TUGEM), Protection and Control (KKGM), the Council of Research, Planning, and Coordination, and Legal Advisory Office were the other MARA branches represented in the steering committee. The Departments of Food, Plant Protection and Quarantine, and Animal Health represented KKGM at the steering committee.

The review of the draft Biosafety Law has slowed somewhat due to the appointment of the new Minister. Previously, the Ministry of Agriculture has sent the draft Law to all related ministries, universities, and organizations for their comments. Comments have been submitted, however the steering committee appears to be disbanded with the appointment of the new Minister of Agriculture. Once the draft law leaves the Ministry of Agriculture, it will be sent to the Prime Ministry to be sent to the Parliament. At the parliament, several committees, including agricultural committee and health committee, will review the draft and make changes, if needed. After completion of the work with these committees, the law will be sent to the General Assembly of the Parliament and wait for its turn to be discussed and adopted.

Even though the desired time for the law to be adopted is by the end of the year, many sources do not believe that this can be accomplished. In order to implement the law, (which is a framework law), the GOT will need to prepare and publish related regulations within the following twelve-month period after it is adopted and published in the Official Gazette. Thus, implementation does not seem possible before 2007.

Technically, there is currently no legislation regulating the import of agricultural biotech products for food, processing or feed. In other words, there are no restrictions. That said, there have been problems importing products that have been labeled 'as containing GMOs'. There are no labeling requirements for foods or feeds, however, if it is labeled, it will likely be rejected at customs on the basis that a lack of regulations on biotech products is grounds for refusing them. No products are approved for release in the environment (planting) since the regulations permitting field trials were withdrawn in 2000.

Marketing Issues

Biotechnology is a concept that is not well understood in Turkey, neither by consumers, producers, regulators, nor even scientists. Unfounded food scares related to the alleged use of hormones in chicken and vegetable production has heightened consumer concerns and exposed a lack of confidence in the Turkish regulatory system. The GOT failure to respond quickly and decisively on these and other food safety related issues has only vindicated alarmists intent on influencing consumer choice. As a result, there are serious market acceptance issues for Turkish importers, producers, retailers and consumers. While consumers and NGOs in Turkey are quick to follow Europe on their reluctance to accept agricultural biotechnology, they also turn a blind eye to EU studies and empirical evidence that demonstrate that foods developed through agricultural biotechnology are as safe as conventional and organic foods.

Local stakeholders have made substantial progress in helping to educate producers, processors, government officials and academicians on the scientific and food safety aspects

of agricultural biotechnology. A number of seminars, newspaper articles and public debates have effectively infused some science into the current debate. A platform of food processors and other stakeholders has been created to provide factual information to help counter the rhetoric of the 'No to GMO' Coalition.

Capacity Building and Outreach

Over five years ago, FAS Turkey began sending biotechnology candidates to the United States under the Cochran Program. The FAS office also regularly translated and disseminated biotechnology information to government officials and stakeholders. In 2001, FAS Turkey became more proactive in the dissemination of biotechnology information and the use of FAS and other programs to implement specific programs. Specific activities include:

- Enlargement of government, private sector and university contacts. Regular consultations with American Soybean Association (ASA) and US Grains Council (USGC) on biotechnology.
- Selected and accompanied 2 GOT food safety officials to FAS sponsored biotechnology seminar in Tunisia in 2002 (Section 108 Funds).
- Organized food industry biotechnology conference in Istanbul in spring 2003 (AMP Funds).
- Nominated two high-level Min Ag officials to attend USGC conference in US in summer 2003.
- Organized large conference for GOT officials in Ankara in fall 2003. Attendance was over 250 persons (AMP and EMO Funds). Conference coordinate with ASA, who assisted to bring speakers from UK and Poland.
- Used EMO funds to send prominent university biotech expert to biotech conference in U.S. fall 2003.
- Disseminated special Biotechnology Issue Newsletter in spring 2004 to over 200 trade and government contacts. The Newsletter is used to disperse regular updates.
- Successfully nominated five food safety officials for Biotechnology International Visitors Program in 2004, 2005 and 2006 (State Dept Funds).
- Nominated GOT officials and journalists for USGC biotechnology programs in summer 2004.
- Selected 3-4 candidates to attend Cochran biotechnology program in fall 2004.
- Hosted visit from the State Department Senior advisor on Agricultural Biotechnology in early 2005.
- Accompanied a delegation of Parliamentarians and other key Department of Agriculture Officials on a visit to the United States to demonstrate how the United States uses and regulates agricultural biotechnology in April 2005. (EMO funds)
- Using the State Department Speaker program, will host a biotechnology expert to speak in three Turkish Universities and meet with Government officials and stakeholders (Sept 2005).

Proposed Activities

FAS Turkey proposes the continuation of education and outreach programs as well as a more targeted information campaign. Specific activities may include:

- Engaging with higher ranking GOT officials at decision making level to ensure that they are included in travel and training opportunities. This group also needs to be supplied with regular updates on scientific developments, such as health and environmental studies.
- Coordination with domestic industry and importers on their approach to respond to criticism in the press and at the policy maker level. This group, possibly working through a third-party food association, needs to have regular access to latest information – especially policy and health related information coming out of the EU.

The industry groups will face the greatest challenge of responding to widespread criticism with one voice.

- Coordination with local Universities to demonstrate the benefits of biotechnology in Turkey.
- Nominate speakers for third-party organized food safety seminars in Ankara and Istanbul for GOT officials, many of whom change regularly. FDA and APHIS participation is always beneficial. Speakers can also include U.S. producers, addressing benefits of producing biotech crops in the U.S.
- Continue Cooperator, Cochran and International Visitor program activities. Visits to the U.S. are very important, however, only five to ten travelers are funded annually, most of whom work in different areas at different decision making levels. These activities should be larger and begin to target higher level officials, and non-English speakers.
- As Turkey would benefit greatly from producing biotech corn and cotton among other crops, direct producer benefits need to be regularly communicated to Turkish officials and local producer groups.