

Public Research & Regulation

Foundation with the objective to involve the public research sector in regulations and international agreements relevant to modern biotechnology

Gene switching and genetic use restriction technologies

Statement - 24 January 2006.

Ad Hoc open ended working group on article 8j of the CBD.

Mrs. Chairman

Thank you very much for giving the Public Research and Regulation Initiative this opportunity to share our thoughts with the delegates of this meeting.

Our organisation the PRRI, are public researchers who do research in modern biotechnology and who work in Government institutes, Academia and international organisations.

Mrs. Chairman, public researchers in developed and developing countries all over the world are exploring naturally occurring gene-switching mechanisms to control one or more specific traits in plants. These applications are called "gene switching technologies".

A specific use of gene switching technologies is aimed at controlling genes responsible for plant reproduction, for example by producing non-viable seed. These applications are called "genetic use-restriction technologies" or GURTs.

There are many different reasons why public sector researchers are exploring these technologies, some of which are briefly discussed in a note that we have made available on the information tables.

To give you just one example, Mr. Chairman, these technologies provide us with the possibility to prevent the spread of specific newly introduced genetic traits in plants, such as the production of pharmaceuticals or vaccines to other crops or wild relatives.

Many members of PRRI conduct research in these fields, and we are more than prepared to provide further information on the need for and progress in this research, either during this meeting or later via mail.

I work for the Instituto de Virologia in Argentina and am involved in the development of animal vaccines in plants, and I will be available for the rest of this meeting to answer any questions you may have about that research.

Understanding the importance of these technologies, the PRRI notes with interest the ongoing debates under the CBD on their potential impacts.

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The Steering Committee of the PRRI supports the overall thrust of the COP5- recommendation in this respect, but is concerned about the way in which the debate following that COP5-recommendation has been conducted.

We are concerned about the quality of the report of the expert group, which shows that the debate lacked scientific input and was hindered by the regrettable confusion between gene switching and genetic use restriction technologies.

We are also concerned about calls for partial or full bans by some groups, which would effectively stop all research in this area.

We believe that in this whole debate insufficient attention has been given to understand WHY research on these technologies is ongoing around the world and that too little consideration has been given to the potential benefits of these technologies.

The Steering Committee of the PRRI strongly urges the delegates to bear in mind the COP-5 decision, which recognizes that these technologies are still in early stages of development, and that any assessment of the potential benefits and risks can, and should, be made on a case by case basis only. This is precisely what the Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety sets out to do.

We firmly believe that a ban on these technologies would be detrimental to the potential of modern biotechnology to contribute to improving food and feed production, health care for all people and environmental protection.

Consistent with the SBSTTA decision on this topic, we therefore urge delegates to recommend that this issue be addressed on a case by case basis, and that research on this technology, including any potential socio-economic impacts, continue to be undertaken with the results shared via the Clearing House Mechanism.