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## Analysis: More Africa countries seen growing GM crops

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By Olivia Kumwenda

JOHANNESBURG (Reuters) - An increasing number of African countries are likely to start growing genetically modified crops, with Kenya leading the way, after the continent for years has lagged in global adoption of the technology.

Africa is under increasing pressure to grow more food as its population increases. Although genetically modified (GM) crops might help boost output, some African countries have banned GM, fearing it could be harmful to humans and animals, hamper exports and hurt small farmers.

South Africa was the continent's sole cultivator of GM maize, cotton and soybeans until 2008, when Egypt began growing GM maize, and Burkina Faso started growing GM cotton.

Now Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, Malawi, Mali, Zimbabwe, Nigeria and Ghana are conducting research and field trials of GM crops including maize, rice, wheat, sorghum and cotton, which could prove to be the first step toward adoption.

"There is increasing support to test biotech in several African countries," said Diran Makinde, director of the African Biosafety Network of Expertise.

Other countries are keenly watching to see whether Kenya adopts the technology, said Felix Mmboyi, deputy director of Africa Biotechnology. In East Africa's biggest economy, GM imports have been a controversial issue.

Kenya now is looking to conduct open trials of GM crops this year after enacting biosafety regulations, the main hurdle that had been holding them back. Industry officials expect the draft regulations to be published in May.

"Kenya will be open to cultivate GM crops. I can assure you Kenya will be the fourth country to allow GMO," Mmboyi said.

Ephraim Mukisira, a director at the Kenya Agricultural Research Institute, said: "We should rely on biotechnology to prevent further losses in yields and performance of crops. We need to expedite scientific methods that reduce time needed to develop new crop varieties."

### RED TAPE

Beyond the usual debates about GM effects on health and the environment, there have also been concerns the presence of GM crops might reduce export opportunities -- a key reason that Zambia banned them years ago.

Potential legal pitfalls pose another concern.

Makinde said 23 countries in Africa have biosafety laws but with 'strict liability' clauses, which make someone liable for any mishaps, without the need to prove any fault on their part.

"No private sector will invest in a country where they can be sued for the slightest or even imaginary damage. This is a no-go area for the biotech crop developer," said Makinde.

The high costs of GM are another hurdle for Africa's small farmers, who account for 70 percent of the region's population and 60 percent of its agricultural output. GM can add to the difficulties of poor farmers in competing with commercial farms.

"Subjecting (small-scale farmers) to GMs would mean that they will lose control over their seeds and that they have to constantly depend on suppliers for seeds every season. How will they afford this?" asked Josephine Akia, policy and advocacy officer at the National Organic Agricultural Movement of Uganda.

In South Africa, the GM maize area was recorded at 1.878 million hectares in 2009 -- the latest year for which figures are available -- with small-scale farmers cultivating only 19,000 hectares of the total.

"You can't market GM technology as being a way out of poverty for small-scale farmers ... if you do that you are being dishonest," said Mariam Mayet, director of the African Center for Biosafety.

### UNTAPPED MARKET

Nevertheless, GM crops have expanded so rapidly in other areas that African countries are not likely to fend them off much longer.

A report issued by the International Service for the Acquisition of Agri-biotech Applications (ISAAA) shows that an 87-fold increase in crop area was recorded globally between 1996 and 2010, making biotech crops the fastest adopted crop technology in the history of modern agriculture.

The continent's untapped market has caught the attention of big U.S. firms DuPont and Monsanto, which are pushing to sell GM seeds on the continent.

Growing foreign investment in African agriculture is likely to bring a greater interest in GM crops as well.

"Investors' appetite is increasing for investing in African agriculture. The combination of fertile land and the demand for soft commodities in Africa makes it a good case," said Bernd Schanzenbaecher, a partner in EBG Capital, an asset management and advisory boutique.

Meanwhile, countries such as Malawi, Mauritius, South Africa and Zimbabwe have enacted biosafety laws, removing what had

been a major hindrance to GM adoption. Most other African governments are also drafting guidelines and regulations.

"Of course we must be alert and responsible in the development of GM crops ... but if we are really serious about food security in Africa, emotional propaganda about these issues will never get us there," South Africa's deputy agriculture minister, Pieter Mulder, said earlier this month.

Researchers say that with food prices expected to be high in 2011, African countries need to work hard to ensure there are enough calories on the continent.

"Biotech is not going to fix all the problems, but it has the potential to make a difference," said Johannesburg scientist Sandy Evans, speaking for biotechnology group AfricaBio.

(Additional reporting by Beatrice Gachenge in Nairobi and Elias Biryabarema in Kampala, Editing by Ed Stoddard and Jane Baird)

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