

Will 'precautionary mindset' at UN biodiversity meeting threaten agricultural innovation?

Some 196 countries may decide to limit access to the benefits of pioneering new biotechnological applications at an upcoming international conference on biodiversity.

Though the prospect runs counter to the idea that science and innovation are essential to conserving the world's biodiversity, it is expected to dominate discussions at the Nov. 17-29 United Nations Biodiversity Conference in Sharm El-Sheikh, Egypt.

If the countries adopt overly stringent new regulations for synthetic biology applications, genetic engineering techniques and digital sequence information on genetic resources, it could prevent these techniques from joining the biodiversity conversation and possibly result in a de-facto moratorium.

The parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) have convened periodically since 1999 The goals of the CBD are a) conservation of biological diversity; b) the sustainable use of the natural world's components, and c) the fair and equitable sharing of benefits arising from the use of genetic resources.

The Subsidiary Body on Scientific, Technical and Technological Advice (SBSTTA) is established by the Convention on Biological Diversity with the mandate to provide fact-based advice on key issues to be addressed at the upcoming conference in Egypt.

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An excessive precautionary mind-set resulting could impede modern biotechnology [that] has contributed to high yields that helped reduce pressure to use more land for farming. It also has the potential to restore deteriorating environments

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