

Will Kenya lift its GMO ban as its agriculture falters?

Some Kenyan scientists and policy-makers are viewing the Ministry of Health's recent statement on genetically modified (GM) crops as an opening to completely lift the country's [GMO ban](#). Scientists should now move with urgency to allow for the continuation of research and compilation of evidence to support applications of biotechnology, as this is an opportunity that has been created for some crops to be commercialized in Kenya, said Dr. Murenga Mwimali, a Cornell Alliance for Science 2019 Global Leadership Fellow who is also the Kenya country coordinator for the [Water Efficient Maize for Africa \(WEMA\)](#) project.

"There's a need to move with speed to allow results and evidence to be the basis for decision making by the competent regulatory authorities, ensuring all the conditions are met," Mwimali maintained. The ministry presented its statement to the Senate Committee on Health in September 2019. It advocated for precautionary measures on the use of GMOs, as recommended by a taskforce appointed in October 2013, which stated that the ban on imports could be lifted on a case-by-case basis upon meeting certain conditions. These include acute, sub-acute and chronic toxicity testing, based on 90-day and two-year animal feeding studies, as well as animal testing for at least three generations to rule out any trans-generational harm, and surveillance of the human population from childhood to adulthood for the first generation and their offspring.

The ministry also dictated that any GM producer whose product causes documented harm is responsible for reparations. The ministry initiated calls for a ban on GMO crops and imports in 2012, based on claims by French scientist Gilles-Éric Seralini that GM maize causes tumors in rats. Though three European studies have since [fully discredited](#) Seralini's work, lifting the ban has been the biggest obstacle to food sustainability in Kenya. Millions of Kenyans are now facing starvation due to the challenges brought about by climate change, and political leaders have raised the alarm that the government has reduced funding for the country's agricultural sector. In its recent statement, the ministry was keen to mention that the country would import food in the event of a severe famine where there is a threat to loss of life. However, "every effort will be made to source the food from non-GMO sources, failing which emergency GM food may be allowed in."

Adan Haji, chair of the parliamentary Committee on Agriculture and Livestock, said all crops are in dire need of attention and asked the government to intervene before the situation becomes disastrous.

Haji, speaking during the 8th East African Grain Council (EAGC) summit recently held in Mombasa, intimated that the excitement of the President's Big Four Agenda was not visible in the agricultural sector, which has not been adequately funded.

"According to the Maputo Declaration, the food sector ought to get 10 percent of the country's GDP, which is not the case in Kenya, and I urge the President to read the mood of the farmers in Kenya, that the agricultural sector is ailing, climate change is terrorizing farmers and it is time we begin the conversation on how to resuscitate agriculture in Kenya," he stated.

Kenya has been moving ahead with field trials of Bt cotton and [Bt maize](#), both of which have performed well, resisting insects and [delivering high yields](#).

Hamadi Boga, principal secretary of the state Department for Crop Development and Agricultural Research, observed that there is an ever-increasing demand for maize due to the increase in population in Kenya. He said the country is not producing enough maize for food as well as for animal feed.

“We are competing for the same grain with the animal feed, raising the prices in the market as well as for the feed companies, since there is no discrimination in pricing, whether it will be used for food or for feed,” Boga said. “Therefore, importing animal feed is a common-sense thing to do.”

Boga, who was speaking at the same EAGC summit, emphasized the need for a policy shift in regard to GMO crops as a possible solution to the challenges facing Kenyan farmers. He noted that Kenya is currently importing fish from China, which is cheaper in the market because China is importing GM maize and soy as fish food from the United States.

In this way, GMOs are still getting into Kenya, he pointed out. “Let us stop this hypocrisy and put things on the table and discuss this topic of biotechnology objectively, so that all of us are able to access these technologies.

His call came at a time when more scientists are pushing to lift the ban on GMO crops in a move to boost food sustainability and enhance economic development not only for Kenya, but for the whole of East Africa.

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