

## Burkina Faso 'farmer of the year' calls for return of Bt cotton

Wiledio Naboho, the 2019 Alliance for Science [Farmer of the Year](#), is mounting fresh pressure on the Burkina Faso government to permit the re-introduction of genetically modified (Bt) cotton.

The 2015 decision to halt cultivation of the GM variety due to [concerns about fiber length](#) is causing farmers to suffer as incomes continue to decline and pesticide pollution increases, Naboho said.

"We are passing through a lot of difficulties... You have to spend more money buying the pesticides. And also, when you are doing this [pesticide] treatment of your cotton farm, your health is in danger," Naboho said.

"You have to use more money. You have to also use more people [paid labor for pesticide application] if you want to have a big land. And at the end of the day, when you sit down and make your calculation, you may come and see that you didn't get more money," he said.

"As a farmer, what I have seen through the Bt cotton when we were farming is it reduced the use of the pesticides that I was talking about, and it protect also the environment. Farmers don't know how to use the pesticides, and we have seen the damage," he added.

Pest attack on cotton is considered the biggest threat to its production all over the world. The bollworm — cotton's most destructive pest — has the capacity to cause up to 90 percent yield loss. In West Africa, 25 to 35 percent of all cotton is lost to these pests.

In 2008, Burkina Faso became the first West African country to commercialize GM cotton with inherent resistance to the bollworm pest through the Bt gene. Farmers were able to dramatically reduce their use of pesticides, going from spraying their conventional cotton fields 15 times per season to control bollworm to [spraying only twice with Bt cotton](#).

Bt cotton became hugely popular and by 2014, more than 70 percent of all cultivated cotton in Burkina Faso was GM. But cotton companies expressed concern the length of fiber from the new variety was shorter than regular and they were having difficulty getting premium prices on the international market. They [thus suspended its production](#) in 2016.

Naboho said farmers are paying the price for that decision with their health and money. "As a farmer, I know the suffering that we are passing through. It's not easy. You can go in the villages. Right now, I'm in the village farming. You can see how farmers are suffering. So for that, if they can do something, it may be helpful for others because the benefit (of Bt cotton), everybody knows it," he said.

During its production, Bt cotton helped cut down on the [use of pesticides by up to 70 percent, cotton yield increased by about 22 percent and farmers' income increased by an average of 51 percent](#), according to a national household survey. The consequences of the withdrawal have been dire not only for farmers, but also for the country's economy, where cotton accounts for 70 percent of its exports. The nation recently lost its position and pride as [Africa's largest producer of the commodity](#) to Mali.

The cotton companies are excited about the return of premium prices following the phase out of Bt cotton, but the farmers are not happy. "Most of my brothers and sisters that are working hard under the sun, they are suffering," Naboho said. "The rain is beating them. At the end of the day, they don't get anything. And people sit in their offices making decision. We have to be very careful and hear from people."

Farmers across the country [have previously made similar demands](#) of Burkina Faso's cotton buying companies, asking them to re-consider the decision to suspend the growing of Bt cotton.

In response, Wilfried A. Yameogo, director general of SOFITEX, the government backed company that buys an estimated 80 percent of all cotton produced in the West African nation, disclosed in 2018 that [negotiations had begun](#) to allow for a return of Bt cotton. But that promise is yet to materialize and the farmers are displeased.

In Burkina Faso, the majority of farmers engage in mixed cropping so they can produce food to feed their families as well as cash crops. Naboho, for example, grows maize, cowpea and other vegetables. He said farmers need access to other genetically modified crops, apart from cotton.

"So, it's not only Bt cotton that we need. We need other crops like maize. We heard about [TELA](#), [drought-tolerant, insect-resistant maize]. It may be helpful for us farmers in Burkina Faso. We heard about [vitamin A-fortified] Golden Rice. Other things [need] to get into our country for farmers."

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