

Namibia to implement biosafety regulations

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WINDHOEK – Namibian authorities have decided to implement the Biosafety Act and the Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety, to which it is a party.

To this effect, the Ministry of Education, which is responsible for science and technology, held a one-day inception workshop on the implementation of the Biosafety Act and the Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety recently.

The Biosafety Act was promulgated in 2006, while regulations to implement and administer the Act are already drafted and must now be finalised.

The Cartagena Protocol obliges countries to handle issues around Genetically Modified Organisms (GMOs) responsibly. Proper legislation and regulations are thus the necessary implementing criteria to handle the GMOs in a responsible and scientific manner.

Namibia has received money from the United Nations' Global Environmental Fund (GEF), whereby a National Biosafety Project was successfully piloted as well as a demonstration project to support the implementation of the National Biosafety Framework for Namibia.

According to the Deputy Minister of Education, Dr David Namwandi, the two projects ended successfully.

"The biosafety regulations have been drafted but awaiting the establishment of the National Research, Science and Technology Council," Namwandi said at the inception workshop, late last week.

For the third time, the country has received funds from GEF to implement the Biosafety Act and the Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety.

The project will start in September to be completed in July 2014.

The overall project goal is to develop an empowered and well capacitated human, infrastructural, legal and administrative capacity in biosafety for the efficient implementation of the Biosafety Act in compliance with the Cartagena Protocol and all other national, regional and international instruments interfacing and interacting with the biosafety law.

The regulations on biosafety will address pre-notice agreements, risk analysis and management, handling, transport, packing, identification, information distribution and Biosafety Clearing House (BCH) (dialogue platform and Internet entrance to exchange and spread information about GMO-related matters), public participation, socio-economic considerations and capacity. The Cartagena Protocol expects a balanced approach with regard to the use of GMOs, the advantages must be available and safety thereof ensured.

Namwandi said biotechnology has evolved in such a manner that modern biotechnology genetic materials are transformed in laboratories, which has a global impact.

“It is used in areas such as agricultural crops, vaccines and medicine and mining and water applications, among others,” he added.

Namwandi said the biggest difference between modern biotechnology and traditional biotechnology is the fact that you can cross species boundaries, by introducing genes from micro-organisms into plants such as maize.

“This raises a number of concerns regarding the safe use of the technology as well as ethical concerns,” the deputy minister said.

Namwandi said one of government’s obligations is to ensure adequate protection in the transfer, handling and use of Living Modified Organisms (LMOs).

He added that Namibia needs to establish infrastructure as well as train its human resources in order to implement the biosafety requirements.

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