

DEBATE ON THE USE OF GMOs IN WINE AIMED AT BRIDGING GAP BETWEEN SCIENCE AND SOCIETY

Cape Town - For the first time in South Africa, members of the media, scientists, stakeholders from the wine industry, key representatives from regulatory bodies as well as the GMO watchdog Biowatch SA, convened to debate the use of genetically modified organisms in the South African wine industry.

The Wine & GMO media round-table was organised by the Public Understanding of Biotechnology (PUB) programme, an initiative of the South African Agency for Science and Technology Advancement (SAASTA)

“The objective was to get scientists and members of the media to start communicating with each other so that the general public can benefit from more prolific, well-informed articles about this highly controversial and complex issue of GMOs that directly affects them, their general wellbeing and the environment,” said Helen Malherbe, who heads up the Public Awareness of Biotechnology (PUB) programme.

“The media form a vital link between scientists and the general public,” she said. In her presentation she showed the results of a survey that indicated that members of the SA public regard universities as the most trustworthy source of information, followed closely by reports in the media.

The programme consisted of presentations by the various stakeholders on subjects ranging from the role of genetically modified organisms (GMOs) in the wine industry, an overview of specific GMO applications and opposition to them, as well as the role of the government in regulating GMOs. This was followed by a debate in which issues were raised and discussed with the relevant stakeholders, and media were given the opportunity to put questions to all the panel members.

The panel of speakers included one of the two scientists who brought applications for the use of genetically modified organisms in wine in SA, Prof Melané Viviers of the University of Stellenbosch. The other speakers were Chantal Arendse, Director of Biosafety at the Department of Agriculture; Dr Viresh Ramburan, project manager at SunBio; Prof Florian Bauer, Professor in Wine Biotechnology at the Institute for Wine Biotechnology, Department at the University of Stellenbosch; Leslie Liddell, Director of Biowatch; and Helen Malherbe of PUB. Ernst le Roux, Chairman of Winetech’s viticultural committee, represented the wine industry at the debate, which was facilitated by eTV’s Debora Patta.

A number of frequently raised GMO issues were discussed, including labelling, consumer protection and environmental impact. The debate steered towards the relationship between scientists and the media, highlighting the gap that exists between these two entities, and raising the issue that a concerted effort by both parties would be vital to improve communication between them and, ultimately, to improve science/society dynamics.

Malherbe explained that the South African Agency for Science and Technology Advancement (SAASTA) - the implementing agency of PUB - was actively engaged in media training for scientists to enable them to “demystify” science by explaining complex scientific research and processes to the media (and, through them, to the

general public) in simple language without compromising the integrity of the science. SAASTA also arranges regular interactions with the media to enable them to “translate” complex scientific concepts into articles that are easily understood by the general public.

In wrapping up the proceedings, Malherbe highlighted the need for a more formal grouping of science journalists in SA, the establishment of which is underway with the help of the World Federation of Science Journalists. “Our country is lagging behind other African countries in having a formally defined body of media to bring science to society,” she said.

The Wine & GMO media round-table follows on a successful similar debate on Biofuels that was held in Johannesburg in March. The next media round-table will be on the use of biotechnology in health applications.

For more information on the PUB programme, future media roundtables as well as a live webcast of both the Wine & GMO and Biofuels debates, visit www.pub.ac.za. Fact sheets on these and other biotechnology issues, which have been subjected to a stringent science editorial process to ensure factual correctness, are also available on the website.

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ADDENDUM

OVERVIEW OF KEY ISSUES RAISED DURING THE WINE & GMO PRESENTATIONS

An overview of the wine industry in SA was given by Dr Viresh Ramburan, in which SA is currently ranked as the ninth largest wine producer in the world, yielding 3% of the total annual global production. In 2007, SA produced 1 044 million litres of wine resulting in a total producer income of R 2.9 billion. Of this locally produced wine, 57% was consumed locally and 87.1 million litres (28% of total exported volume) were exported to the UK, South Africa's single largest export market. Several white and red wine grape cultivars are grown on approximately 102 000 hectares in South Africa, each offering a unique product depending on the cultivar, specific region and wine style.

SA is a member of the International Organisation of Wine and Vine (OIV), an intergovernmental organisation that aims to help harmonize practices and standards concerning vines, wine, and wine/vine based products. OIV currently supports research activities involving GM organisms but not the commercial use thereof in wine making, and as a member of the OIV, SA adheres to these guidelines. The USA and Canada, where the GM yeasts have been approved for commercial use, are not members of the OIV (www.oiv.int/uk).

In her presentation, Prof Melané Viviers pointed out that genetic modification technologies are applied not only for commercial gain – an accusation frequently levelled at them, but to gain fundamental information such as solutions to support environmentally friendly production. “South African crops are among the most sprayed crops in the world,” she said, “with up to 12 full-scale sprays of fungicides a year.” They are also working to find solutions to the impact of climate change by improving the stress tolerance of the crops

The technology is also applied for health reasons, which include removing those agents from the wine that are carcinogenic to humans.

Prof Florian Bauer mentioned that the wine industry has always been technology intensive. The first biotechnology application on yeast, a crucial element in wine production and the object of his research, was around 600 AD.

Chantal Arendse discussed the general regulatory issues related to the two GMO (wine related) applications received to date. Leslie Liddell of Biowatch SA raised the issue of inadequate public notification of applications, both in the selection of media and the scientific terms used. She also gave some practical suggestions for improving the communication to actively promote public participation and access to information. These suggestions were welcomed by the scientists present at the debate.

Leslie moreover stressed the fact that Biowatch was not opposed to biotechnology, but to GMOs, and said that no tests have as yet been carried out to determine the long-term effects of GMOs on humans, animals and the environment.

NOTE FOR EDITORS

The Department of Science and Technology (DST) funds the PUB programme which aims to ensure a clear, balanced understanding of the scientific principles, related issues and potential of biotechnology and to stimulate public debate around its applications in society. SAASTA, a business unit for the National Research Foundation, is the implementing agency.

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