



Date: Friday, 12 September 2008

Interview with Dr. Gatsha Mazithulela, Executive Director, Biosciences, Council for Scientific & Industrial Research (CSIR) in South Africa

What is the sentiment at the CSIR and in the consortium? Are you relieved that the battle is over for now?

The CSIR is pleased that it can continue with its research in the greenhouses. The consortium shares this sentiment.

How far have you fallen behind with your research plans and will you be able to catch up?

The project had to re-strategize and we have made excellent progress. We were requesting for a permit to work with ABS#1; as we speak, ABS#2 has been field tested in the USA. The CSIR has fallen behind on our research work but our researchers will do their utmost to make up for lost time.

Do you think that this ruling suggests that genetic modification on indigenous crops will be allowed?

We don't believe that this ruling should be interpreted as anything more than it is. It is a permit to grow transformed sorghum in a contained area. We don't view it as a policy change.

Would you label this a milestone decision?

No, not necessarily. Contained greenhouse trials on indigenous crops are undertaken by researchers around the world; it is an almost everyday occurrence in plant biotechnology.

What do you think swung the decision your way?

This is contained greenhouse trials; there is almost zero risk of gene escape. The government was obviously satisfied by the containment measures as well contingency measures we have put in place.

So what happens after greenhouse trials? Will you apply for field trials?

The research findings from the contained experimentation determine the next step. The progress so far is very positive, but it is too early to say what the next step will be.

How will you guarantee that no contamination happens during the greenhouse trials?

Again, this is contained trials in a greenhouse. We have put in place risk mitigation measures that are satisfactory to the panel. The greenhouse is also approved as per existing legislation.

How would you defend a statement that this permit approval was taken in the interest of agriculture and at the cost of the environment?

All aspects are taken into consideration through the regulatory process: agricultural, science and technology, environmental, trade, health etc. So the statement is incorrect.

This research is part of an African-led initiative that brings together seven leading African research organizations and two US-based organizations. As Africans, we identified our greatest need and through a competitive grant process, the Gates Foundation funded this project. Undertaking research locally in contained greenhouse trials and generating our own biosafety data, using our own scientists and working on one of our own crops is something that we should all be proud of.

End

Issued by ABS Project's Communication Department

Daniel Kamanga, Tel +27 11 781 4449 (fixed line); +27 82 787 4799 (mobile)

Email: dkamanga@ahbfi.org

###

About the ABS Project:

The ABS Project is funded by a grant from the Grand Challenges in Global Health Initiative, with a budget of \$18.6 million over five years.

The Grand Challenges initiative was launched by the Gates Foundation in 2003, in partnership with the National Institutes of Health, to help apply innovation in science and technology to the greatest health problems of the developing world. The ultimate goal of the initiative is to create "deliverable technologies" – health tools that are not only effective, but also inexpensive to produce, easy to distribute, and simple to use in developing countries.

For additional information, please visit www.supersorghum.org