



Undoing the ISAAA Myths on GM Crops

Media Briefing by GM Freeze and Friends of the Earth Europe

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This afternoon, the industry-sponsored International Service for the Acquisition of Agri-biotech Applications (ISAAA) group launches its annual report on genetically modified crops around the world. As usual, the report aims to show GM crops in a positive light through inflated and massaged figures.

Pete Riley, Director of the UK's GM Freeze said: "Once again ISAAA have massaged the data on GM crops to making a struggling industry look impressive. The vast majority of hundreds of millions farmers in the world use conventional seeds to produce food and this is where we need to concentrate research rather than on a technology that has delivered very little."

Helen Holder, GMO campaign coordinator at Friends of the Earth Europe said: "A tiny proportion of farmers in the world are growing GM crops on a very small fraction of the world's agricultural land. The biotech industry is inflating the figures in an attempt to convince the media and politicians that GM crops are a success. The latest industry figures for Europe are highly unreliable which indicates that this is probably the case for other regions as well."

Below, (see also www.gmfreeze.org/page.asp?id=365&iType=1079 and www.foeeurope.org/GMOs/position_papers/ISAAA_media_briefing.pdf) GM Freeze and Friends of the Earth Europe respond to some of the ISAAA statements in this year's report "Brief 39, Global Status of Commercialized Biotech/GM Crops: 2008, Clive James, ISAAA".

1. GM crops are grown by very few farmers

ISAAA says: "Number of biotech crop farmers increased by 1.3 million in 2008, reaching 13.3 million globally in 25 countries – notably 90%, or 12.3 million were small and resource-poor farmers in developing countries." (page xiv executive summary)

Even assuming that the ISAAA numbers are reliable, the UN's International Fund for Agricultural Development estimates that there are 450 million small and medium sized farmers in the world (www.twinside.org.sg/title2/susagri/susagri068.htm).

The International Labour Organisation (ILO) has estimated the number of farm workers to be 1.3 billion worldwide. [1] The 13.3 million farmers that the ISAAA claims are growing GM crops would therefore only account for about 1%.

So GM crops are grown by a tiny 2.7% of small or medium scale farmers worldwide, at the most, and less than 1% of farmers globally.

2. 2008: Few countries, little land

ISAAA says: "Number of countries planting biotech crops soars to 25 – a historical milestone." (page IX executive summary)

In 2008, two new countries grew GM crops compared to 2007. The 2.4% of global agricultural land under GM crop cultivation in 2007 has risen 0.2% to 2.6%. Calling this an "historical milestone" is a little overstated to say the least.

3. Inflated figures for the EU, massaged figures globally

3.1 ISAAA says: “All seven EU countries increased their Bt maize hectareage in 2008, resulting in an overall increase of 21% to reach over 100,000 hectares.” (page xvii, executive summary)

The ISAAA has inflated the figures by almost a quarter and has claimed that GM crop cultivation in the EU in 2008 showed “a 21% increase over 2007” [2] when in fact there has been a 2% DECREASE. The group erased the latest country to have banned growing GM crops – France – from its calculations. By doing this, it could mask the real figures and claim an increase for 2008. [3]

3.2 ISAAA says: “Global hectareage of biotech crops continued its strong growth in 2008 for the thirteenth consecutive year – a 9.4%, or 10.7 million hectare increase, reaching 125 million hectares, or more precisely, 166 million ‘trait hectares’, equivalent to a 15% growth or a 22 million ‘trait hectare’ increase.” (page v and xi executive summary)

In order to make the area under GM crop cultivation sound better than it is, the ISAAA is reporting a 33% greater increase than is actually the case. The industry-sponsored group does this by multiplying the actual surface area by the number of GM traits in the crops. So, for a field of one hectare growing a GM crop which is tolerant to two herbicides and secretes insecticide toxin (three traits) suddenly becomes three fields, and ISAAA therefore triples its figures for the area under GM crop cultivation.

This is a rather desperate and nonsensical approach to try and make the industry appear more successful.

Three countries that the ISAAA are likely to emphasize are India, China and South Africa as these represent developing countries where GM crops are grown. The table below calculates the percentage of agricultural land in each country that GM crops actually represent:

Country	Agricultural Land Million ha	GM crop land Million ha	% GM
India	180.18	7.6	4.2
China	554.851	3.8	0.7
South Africa	99.6400	1.8	1.8

4. Who are ISAAA?

ISAAA claims [4] “to contribute to poverty alleviation, by increasing crop productivity and income generation, particularly for resource-poor farmers, and to bring about a safer environment and more sustainable agricultural development”. A glance at their financial supporters – all major biotech corporations including Monsanto, Bayer, Syngenta and Du Pont - suggests that the interests of private sector links in the North are at the heart of ISAAA’s activities.

The sources of data used in the global status report are unclear. For instance, the on-line PowerPoint presentation of the 2007 Global Status Report cites the source as “Clive James 2007”. Aside from the US, very few governments record the area of GM and non-GM crops separately, so data are collected per crop, ie maize areas include GM and non-GM crops. Thus ISAAA must generally rely on industry data for seed sales to calculate how many hectares were planted. China poses more difficult problems because the seeds come from several public institutions. [5]

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NOTES

[1] See www.ilo.org/public/english/employment/strat/wer2004.htm

[2] See

www.europabio.org/articles/GBE/EuropaBio%20Press%20Release%20cultivation%20figures%202008_290908.pdf

[3] France banned the one GMO authorised for cultivation in the EU, Monsanto's MON 810, in 2008 on environmental and health grounds, as allowed under EU law. Until it joined the EU in 2004, Romania grew GM soy that is not authorised in the EU. Therefore on joining the EU it stopped growing GM soy.

[4] See www.isaaa.org/inbrief/default.html

[5] See www.gmfreeze.org/uploads/ISAAA_Q&A_2009.pdf