ECONOMIC GROWTH, AGRICULTURE AND TRADE

Sacramento Conference Tackles Biotech Food Controversy

Luigi Crespo, USAID

Ann Veneman, Secretary of Agriculture, visits with Jacqueline Schafer, USAID Deputy Assistant Administrator of Economic Growth, Agriculture and Trade, at the Ministerial Conference and Expo on Agricultural Science and Technology. They are holding up Improving Lives*, a publication USAID distributed at the conference.*

SACRAMENTO, Calif.—The first high-level conference on the role of science and technology in reducing hunger and poverty in the developing world drew ministers of health, agriculture, and environment from more than 120 nations to Sacramento, California, June 23–25.

The Ministerial Conference and Expo on Agricultural Science and Technology, organized by USAID and the U.S. Department of Agriculture, included discussions about the use of "biotech" food—food that has been genetically engineered.

Biotech food, such as newly engineered varieties of corn and soybeans, are widely used in the United States and some other countries. But some European and African nations have raised concerns about food safety and environmental issues with this technology.

President Bush has urged those countries to allow such foods to be sold and consumed, in part because biotech foods can greatly increase food production by developing hardy plants resistant to drought and disease.

"The United States has identified three priorities for reducing global hunger: increasing agricultural productivity, ending famine, and improving nutrition," Bush told the conference in a video presentation.

"Science and technology hold great promise in meeting these priorities. By combining new technology and good policy, all the nations of the world can work together to increase living standards."

Agriculture Secretary Ann M. Veneman told reporters after the conference that there are four major areas for future work to cut hunger: solving water shortages; applying existing research to poor areas; revitalizing research in staple crops of developing countries; and spurring governments, universities, and business to collaborate more closely.

The meeting also focused on ensuring access to technology, improving forest management, raising productivity, fighting hunger and poverty, and increasing trade capacity in the developing world.

NGOs and commercial companies set up displays showing ways to improve farm output in the developing world.

USAID Assistant Administrator for Economic Growth, Agriculture and Trade Emmy Simmons said: "We are moving forward with a focus on agricultural science and technology. We fully support the President's commitment to end hunger in Africa."

Outside the convention area, protestors said the conference had the sole purpose of supporting large agribusiness corporations and biotech companies. The demonstrators held their own events to emphasize organic farming methods, development of markets, and opposition to agribusiness development of biotech products.

Veneman said the conference was about feeding hungry people worldwide and biotechnology was only one issue discussed.

On the final day of the conference, there were a number of field trips to farms and agricultural research facilities in the Sacramento area. California has some of the most productive farmland in the world. Crops include oranges, rice, grapes, grains, fruits, and livestock. ★

By Harry Edwards, USAID/LPA.

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GLOBAL DEVELOPMENT ALLIANCE

Benin Farmers Learn Sunflowers Can Replace Cotton Crops

COTONOU, Benin—The price of cotton—a mainstay of the economy of Benin—fluctuates so widely that low prices either hurt farmers or high prices cause shortages of cottonseed for local oil processors. To address this problem, USAID is working with a private company and an NGO to introduce sunflowers as a new crop.

Fludor, a company specializing in edible oils, will invest $838,000 to re-equip its cottonseed plant in Benin to process sunflower oil for the local market.

USAID has granted Enterprise Works Worldwide $320,000 to teach farmers how to grow sunflowers.

Each participating farmer will pledge $120 to purchase inputs such as seed and fertilizer. Fludor will finance the inputs up front, and promises to buy the farmers' harvests for up to three years. This represents almost a 1:4 leverage of USAID funds.

Seeds will be checked by Enterprise Works Worldwide for oil content, proportion of damaged seeds, and other attributes.

Farmers will have the opportunity to learn how to use mechanical presses that Enterprise Works Worldwide will offer for sale to make sunflower oil.

Beekeeping is another spinoff possibility for farmers. Bees attracted to sunflowers make flavorful honey.

The goal is to cultivate 2,500 hectares with sunflowers by 2006. Assuming average production of 1,000 kilograms per hectare, seed production would total 3,750 tons.

Fludor estimates that processing this amount of seeds would be profitable. Once domestic production reaches 3,750 tons of sunflower seeds, Fludor will reequip its plant.

Enterprise Works Worldwide tested several sunflower varieties in the Atacora Department in northern Benin in 2000 and 2001. The results of tests were good, with the yield per acre averaging 1,283 kilograms. When Enterprise Works sold the sunflower oil on the local market, consumers liked it and were willing to pay the same price they do for other vegetable oils.

Farmers are very interested in growing something other than cotton. For most, cotton is a losing proposition, even when the cost of family labor is not included in the calculation. Farmers keep growing it because it is their only source of cash income.

As a crop, sunflowers offer several advantages. Unlike cotton cultivation, which is hard on soils, the plowed under remains of sunflower crops improve the soil.

Sunflower seed oil is high quality and low in saturated fats. Sunflower seedcake, a byproduct of industrial oil processing, is high in protein and a good source of animal feed.

"This private-public partnership is truly a win-win situation: a win for farmers willing to take a chance on a new crop and a win for Fludor, which can count on getting the raw material it needs. And it's a win for the environment," said Barbara Dickerson, USAID/Benin's program officer. ★

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