

The Winners and Losers of Brazil's Biosecurity Law

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The Brazilian Senate just passed the Law of Biosecurity, which among other things gives CTNBio (The National Technical Commission of Biosecurity) the power to permit or not the planting and selling of genetically modified produce.

Over the past years, CTNBio has approved the use of such produce. The passing of this legislation is a huge defeat for environmental and consumer rights groups who have lobbied hard to defeat the measure.

"The senators have shown that the country is chained to the interests of big businesses who promote transgenics," said Greenpeace.

The decision was on the other side a clear victory from Monsanto, a US company which has for years been trying to promote the acceptance of transgenics in the country.

Now the measure must go back to the House for approval. The House had previously approved the bill, but other measures were added in the Senate.

It is unlikely that the vote will happen before the upcoming planting season of soy.

Therefore, the President may be forced to decide or not to sign another provisional measure. which would allow the planting of transgenic soy for the 2004-2005 harvest.

New Law

The Brazilian government once again placed the issue of GMOs in the forefront. Currently, leaders are frantically debating a proposal called the Law of Biosecurity.

Angela Cordeiro, an agriculture engineer and specialist in biosecurity, says that the government is trying to push through a vote rapidly for two reasons:

"First, President Lula does not want to sign another provisional measure, because every time he does so, his image among the Left suffers; secondly, the agro-industrial lobby is exerting great pressure for approval of the use of GMO."

At the end of 2003, during a trip to the United States, President Lula bowed to the pressures of agro-business producers and directed Vice-President José Alencar to sign a provisional measure to allow for the planting of transgenics.

This same group said that they are satisfied with Dias' proposal, which allows for the commercialization of some transgenic products as well as augmenting the power of the CTNBio who will be entrusted with the debate over the use of GMOs.

CTNBio is comprised of ministers, workers, business people, farmers and representatives of civil society. Their objective is to give advice to the government in the formulation and implantation of policies related to biosecurity. In the past, this commission has consistently been in favor of GMOs.

According to Cordeiro, the proposed law favors large-scale farmers and agricultural business as it gives them carte blanche to plant transgenics, which GMO companies allege are cheaper to plant, but whose environmental impacts have yet to be evaluated.

In article 30, the proposed law grants amnesty to all producers of GMOs who obtained favorable decisions from the Justice Department or from investigative governmental branches, such as Ibama (Brazilian Institute of the Environment and Renewable Natural Resources) or Anvisa (National Agency for Hygiene) before the passage of the proposed law.

"In Rio Grande do Sul, with so many confusing and contradictory lawsuits, many farmers took advantage of the situation and began to produce transgenic soy, without there being any time to study the impact of such planting on the environment. This amnesty says to them, You are free from all responsibility!", said Cordeiro.

In article 17, the proposed law states that inspection of transgenics be done by Ibama e Anvisa at the request of CTNBio. A goal of these organs would be to control the activities of farmers and corporations who use GMOs.

"So, large-scale farmers get the economic benefits, the government controls political decisions, and the tax-payers flip the bill," commented Cordeiro.

"The right thing to do would be that businesses and farmers that use GMOs finance research and inspection of their products. The proposal assumes equipment and technology that the State does not have. Today there is no one trained to do inspections."

According to Cordeiro, to evaluate if one seed is transgenic or not costs between 3-5 dollars. Some seeds cost as much as US\$ 300.

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