

Who is Biosafety South Africa?

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The African Centre for Biosafety (ACB) is a non-profit organisation, based in Johannesburg, South Africa. It provides authoritative, credible, relevant and current information, research and policy analysis on genetic engineering, biosafety, biopiracy, agrofuels and the Green Revolution push in Africa.

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ACRONYMS

BSA	Biosafety South Africa
DAFF	Department of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries
DEA	Department of Environmental Affairs
DST	Department of Science and Technology
GM	Genetically Modified
GMO	Genetically Modified Organisms
IWBT	Institute for Wine Biotechnology

Various stakeholders have approached The African Centre for Biosafety (ACB) to explain the difference between the ACB and a body called 'Biosafety South Africa.' We hope that this briefing paper will provide some clarity on the role and function of Biosafety South Africa.

The African Centre for Biosafety (ACB), established in 2004, campaigns against the uptake of genetic engineering in Africa, with a particular focus on South Africa. We are a non-profit organisation, providing authoritative, credible, relevant and current information, research and policy analysis on issues pertaining to genetic engineering, biosafety and biopiracy in Africa.

The term biotechnology is used to describe the application of genetic modification/ engineering techniques. It does not refer thus to traditional biotechnologies.

INTRODUCTION

Biosafety South Africa (BSA), launched on 18 February 2010, is a national biosafety service platform falling under the auspices of the Department of Science and Technology (DST).¹ BSA is publically funded from the coffers of the DST through the Technology Innovation Agency. BSA's total annual budget is currently around R5 million.² In addition, BSA is set to generate income from the biotechnology industry for services rendered related to GMO permit applications.

The ostensible aim of the organisation is to support the development of innovative, safe and sustainable product development within the South African biotechnology sector.³ However, the BSA is committed to the commercialization of locally developed biotechnology products through private-private partnerships.⁴ The organisation is thus involved in trying to create a strong South African biotechnology sector, through a biosafety platform.

BSA'S POSITION IN THE REGULATORY PROCESS

BSA positions itself between biotechnology researchers/developers and the regulatory process. It is not legally mandated to be part of the regulatory process. BSA provides the following services to its clientele:

- Assistance with regulatory applications, e.g. registration of GM facilities and the trial release of a GMO.
- Development of a service provider network for all necessary analyses that has to be undertaken for permit applications.
- Provision of advice to developers of GM technology at an early stage regarding the biosafety requirements and implications of their projects to help ensure an integrated approach to GM research and development.
- Publication of user-friendly guidance documents and checklists for all regulatory applications.
- Assistance with conducting required risk assessments by informing applicants about the regulators' expectations and the necessary support structures that need to be in place to generate the required data. BSA also assists stakeholders with validating information and evaluating applications to support the applicant.
- Ad hoc consultation and assistance as required.⁵

A training programme on the regulatory requirements for biotechnology research and product development, specifically aimed at academic researchers is still being development.⁶

BSA has a close working relationship with the Department of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries (DAFF) and the Department of Environmental Affairs (DEA). These departments review guidelines and documents developed by BSA before they are published on the BSA website.

BSA's work is not likely to change decision making by the GMO Executive Council on GMOs, but will probably increase the quality and quantity of permit applications submitted to the GMO registrar. As the organisation specifically focuses on enabling the local development of safe biotechnological products, an increase in trial and commercial release applications by South African institutions and commercial applications is envisaged.

BIOSAFETY RESEARCH COMMISSIONED BY BSA

BSA prioritises capacity building on biosafety within the South African research and development community. They fund 11 post-graduate bursaries and are trying to establish biosafety capacity within various research groups. Other current initiatives related to capacity building include the generation of relevant management information on biosafety by supporting strategic biosafety research. Since its establishment, Biosafety South Africa has committed over R5 million for the period 2010-2012 to strategic biosafety research.⁷ BSA currently supports three research projects, and is negotiating funding for three additional projects all focussing on the possible impact of biotechnology products on the environment and human health.⁸ Research priorities in this area are defined in cooperation with all regulatory bodies, including the GMO Executive Council. In addition to this, BSA is aiming to provide funding for biosafety research during the commercialization of a biotechnology product.⁹

Although BSA is not a formal partner in the research currently carried out by SANBI on the impact of Monsanto's GM maize, Mon810 on the environment, BSA staff are present at all workshops and meetings organised as part of SANBI's research and is also co-funding some of the research projects within this programme.¹⁰

ORGANISATIONAL STAFFING

All BSA staff have a strong scientific background. Hennie Groenewald, who holds a PhD in Plant biotechnology and an established scientific career before joining Biosafety South Africa, currently heads BSA. He previously worked for the South African sugarcane research institute and Stellenbosch University and still holds an extraordinary senior lecturer position at this university.¹¹ Other BSA staff members also have strong research backgrounds. Project Manager Anita Burger has a PhD in Plant Biotechnology from Stellenbosch University and has researched various aspects of plant and yeast biotechnology and molecular biology.¹² She previously worked for the Institute for Wine Biotechnology (IWBT) at Stellenbosch University, Sunbio (a commercial branch of IWBT), and at the biotechnology division, of ARC Infruitec-Nietvoorbij.¹³ In addition to this, BSA has employed two research officers, holding Masters Degrees in molecular zoology and molecular virology.¹⁴

CONCLUSION

In principle we are in favour of more local biosafety experts and bodies becoming involved in South Africa. However, we are concerned about BSA's strong inclination towards the promotion of biotechnology and its inevitable links to the pro-biotechnology machinery in South Africa. BSA's formidable expertise would be better utilised conducting wholly independent biosafety research- particularly on the impacts of GMOs especially GM maize on human and animal health, the environment and society. It would appear that those that benefit most from GMOs will be the ultimate beneficiaries of BSA's work. We hope that BSA will not become a missed opportunity for biosafety in South Africa.

REFERENCES

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