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COUNCIL

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Technical Consultation on Low Levels of Genetically Modified (GM) Crops in International Food and Feed Trade

Executive Summary

Several countries have requested FAO to facilitate international dialogue as a first step towards resolving potential trade disruptions involving low levels of GM crops in international food and feed trade. Such an initial dialogue would be of a technical nature and evidence-based. The Technical Consultation proposed in this paper aims at facilitating international dialogue among FAO Members on low levels of GM crops in international food and feed trade.

The results of FAO technical analyses on the topic, including economic and trade-related policy analysis would be presented for discussion at the Technical Consultation, an event which is not intended to reach policy agreements but to facilitate achieving a common understanding. It should also not be seen as an opportunity for FAO to take a position on the issue of low level GM presence.

Previous formal inter-governmental work on GM concluded in 2008 with the *Codex Ad Hoc Intergovernmental Task Force on Foods Derived from Biotechnology* being discontinued after completing its work on the elaboration of principles and guidelines for the scientific assessment of the safety of foods derived from biotechnology.

Suggested action by the Council

The Council may wish to:

- a) Review the proposal to convene a Technical Consultation to facilitate international dialogue on low levels of Genetically Modified (GM) crops in international food and feed trade; and
- b) Support the convening of such a Technical Consultation in early 2014.

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I. Background

1. Low levels of genetically modified (GM) crops in international food and feed trade are of growing concern to national authorities in a number of countries and private sector bodies. National policies and regulations that govern the acceptability of GM crops vary. The land area under GM cultivation has grown steadily over the last two decades and many GM crops are important in international trade (including maize, canola and soybean).
2. Furthermore, available information suggests that there are new GM crops under development and that a growing number of countries are involved in developing these crops. Current systems of production, handling and transport leads to the unintentional low levels of GM crops in “non-GM” consignments and unauthorized GM crops in consignments of authorized GM crops. A number of trade-related problems have been reported due to such unintentional mixing and the volume of international trade in GM foods and feed is increasing. There is therefore an urgent need for initiating international dialogue and discussions on the issue of low levels of GM crops in international food and feed trade.
3. Previous formal inter-governmental work on GM concluded in 2008 with the *Codex Ad Hoc Intergovernmental Task Force on Foods Derived from Biotechnology* being discontinued after completing its work on the elaboration of principles and guidelines for scientific assessment of the safety of foods derived from biotechnology. Although these guidelines are available, there are no relevant international standards establishing acceptable low levels of GM crops in traded food and feed, as a result of unintended presence.
4. In order to better understand the extent of the potential trade disruption, a trade economic study was initiated by FAO. Input was provided from approximately 70 countries. The preliminary analysis of the study has confirmed that there have been several disruptions to trade involving major food commodities.
5. The *Codex Ad Hoc Intergovernmental Task Force on Foods Derived from Biotechnology* elaborated principles and guidelines on safety assessment of foods derived from biotechnology during 2001–2007. Since the Task Force was discontinued in 2008, there has been no formal FAO forum to discuss relevant issues at the international level. Several countries have requested FAO to convene international dialogue as a first step towards finding solutions. Such an initial dialogue would be of technical nature, and be science and evidence-based.

II. Objectives and scope

6. The proposed meeting aims at facilitating international dialogue for FAO Members on low levels of GM crops in international food and feed trade. The results of FAO technical analyses on the topic, including economic and trade-related policy analysis will be presented for discussion.
7. The scope of the proposed meeting would be technical and exploratory, providing a forum for experts to present results of their research findings on the issue. It will be the prerogative of participating FAO Members to utilize the findings and technical suggestions for relevant national policies. The technical consultation is not intended to be an event to reach policy agreements.

III. Expected results

8. The proposed meeting would contribute to achieving the following results:
 - Awareness raised on the issue and surrounding factors and possible impacts on food security
 - Improved understanding and recognition of various points of view on the issue from relevant stakeholders
 - Agreement to work collaboratively to further discuss the issue of low levels of GM crops in international food and feed trade.

IV. Financial implications

9. The total cost is estimated to be USD 250,000, on the basis of a Technical Consultation assuming that financial support is provided to 60 developing country delegates. According to the extra-budgetary funds made available, developing countries would receive financial support. The Government of Canada has offered to provide extra-budgetary funds to cover most of the costs of the Technical Consultation. FAO staff time and in-kind contributions will be provided in addition to these costs.

V. Strategy for implementation

10. The Technical Consultation would primarily be intended for national trade and food regulatory policy officials invited from all FAO Members. In order to ensure that a wide variety of views on the topic are exchanged and information shared, the consultation would involve relevant stakeholders including NGOs, Civil Society Organizations, partner organizations including the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), the World Health Organization (WHO), the World Trade Organization (WTO) and the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), private sector and academia.

11. The initiative would follow the approach of the previous project on the same topic, namely the development of the FAO GM Foods Platform, which was characterized by balanced and evidence-based dialogue. As a result, the launching of the FAO GM Foods Platform on 1 July 2013 was well received by the Members. Thus, with the anticipated role of FAO as a neutral convener and facilitator, a similar approach would be taken for the proposed consultation.

12. The planning phase of the Technical Consultation would be open to Members which wish to be involved in the process.

VI. Suggested action by the Council

13. The Council may wish to:

- a) Review the proposal to convene a Technical Consultation to facilitate international dialogue on low levels of GM crops in international and feed trade; and
- b) Support the convening of such a Technical Consultation in early 2014.