

## Interview with a Focal Point: Philippines – Merle B. Palacpac

*“You have to be determined to face the resistance and keep moving ahead to establish a solid GM food safety assessment process for your country”*

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In order to facilitate Focal Points to learn from each other’s experiences, FAO interviews Focal Points from various countries to share their national requirement, process and experience on GM food safety assessment. This article features an interview session with Merle B. Palacpac, the Focal Point for Philippines, who is a risk manager.

**Interviewer:** Can you please tell us about your background?



**Merle Palacpac (Merle):** I am the Chief of the National Plant Quarantine services (PQS) in the Bureau of Plant Industry of Philippines. I have been working with the government for 35 years. I graduated with a B.S in Biology and pursued my masters in Plant Pathology at the University of Philippines. I am one of the pioneers in setting up the Biotechnology regulations and I serve as the alternate to the Director of the Bureau of Plant Industry (BPI) who is the representative to the Department of Scientific and Technical information of the Biosafety committee. I have been a regulator for 17 years and I am in charge of all the regulations concerned with GM plant products.

**Interviewer:** How and why were you chosen to be the Focal Point for Philippines?

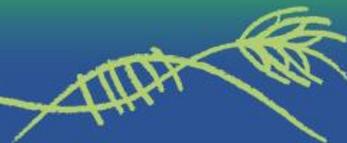
**Merle:** Regulation of GMOs falls under the mandate of the PQS of the BPI. Since I am the chief of the PQS and as a vice-chair in the Biosafety core team, I was chosen to be the Focal Point for Philippines to the FAO GM Foods Platform.

**Interviewer:** As the Focal point and the Chief of the PQS, are you a risk manager, a risk communicator or a risk assessor?

**Merle:** I am a risk manager as I supervise the entire GM food safety assessment process and in charge of all the procedure and the work of the risk assessors.

**Interviewer:** Does Philippines have a guideline for GM Food safety assessment. If yes, are these in line with the Codex guideline for the conduct of food safety assessment of foods derived from recombinant DNA plants?

**Merle:** Yes, Philippines follows a guideline for the conduct of GM food safety assessment. We used a guideline called as the Administrative Order no. 8 (AO8) which was declared null and void after being used for 15 years due to various reasons. So, we right away came up with the Joint Department



Circular no.1, Series of 2016 which are based on the Codex guidelines. These guidelines can be found at the National Committee of Biosafety Philippines website found at <http://tiny.cc/FAO-gm-res>.

**Interviewer:** Could you please explain to us the process of the GM food safety assessment right from the submission of the dossier by the applicant?

**Merle:** At first, the applicant submits the dossier to the BPI. The applicant also has to download the risk assessment tool from our website, which contains a set of questions that needs to be answered and submitted along with the application. The applicant must also submit related literature for reference wherever applicable. The application is then sent to the Biotech Secretariat who checks the application for completeness and correctness. The Secretariat has five working days to complete this task. If the application is complete and correct, it is farmed out to the external panels for the risk assessment. If the application is incomplete, it is sent back to the applicant, who has 60 days to re-submit the dossier.

For the safety assessment process, the application along with the risk assessment tool and the literature is farmed out to four different panels that consist of experts and scientists: The Scientific and the Technical Review Panel (STRP), The BPI Plant Product Safety Services Division (PPSSD), the Biosafety committee under the Department of Health, Bureau of Animal Industry (for feed assessment) and the Department of Environment and Natural Resources. The panels have 30 days to conduct and complete the assessment and send the results to the Biotech Secretariat who prepares a summary and sends it to the Department of Agriculture, Biosafety Committee. The committee assesses the submission and makes a recommendation to the BPI director who then approves or rejects the product. The BPI director has the final say in issuing a permit. Alongside this process, the applicant also has to fill in a Public Information Sheet which is a summary published in two newspapers where the public is invited to comment. The overall process ideally takes around 85 days. However, there is a lot of going back and forth due to incomplete information or the need for additional information so it takes much longer!

**Interviewer:** What expertise do you have in the external panels that conduct the GM food safety assessment?

**Merle:** Like I mentioned, we have experts in the field of molecular characterization, allergenicity, food technology, plant technology – a lot of them are professors and doctors.

**Interviewer:** What are some of the challenges that you face as a risk manager for GM food safety assessment in Philippines?

**Merle:** In the beginning when we used Guidelines A08 for GM food safety assessment, only the BPI was involved in the GM food safety assessment. However with the new guidelines, we have to involve the other departments and ministries too – this is a great decision since it involves many more experts to review the applications. However, the challenge remains in the fact that the ministries are still yet to appreciate and understand the importance of the topic of GM food safety. More capability building is required. Another challenge that we face here is the resistance by the public against GM food, which is the main reason why our previous guidelines were declared null and void. We need to mentor young people, who will take over our present positions and they need to be well informed and educated about GM food safety.

**Interviewer:** Do you have tips for countries with lesser experience in GM food safety assessment?



Merle: GM foods, with its numerous traits, make food more nutritious not only for the consumers but also helps the farmers with their harvest and sustainability. When countries are setting up their policy and framework for GM food safety assessment, it is only natural that there will be a lot of resistance both from the policy makers as well as the general public. In Philippines, the anti- GM movement went to the grass root level – the farmers, and provided them with incorrect information about GMOs. Thus, our work, as Focal Points, as regulators, is to educate the farmers, and disseminate the correct information about the usefulness of GM crops and their safety assessment process. You have to be determined to face the resistance and keep moving ahead to establish a solid GM food safety assessment process for your country – I was in the court (laughs) fighting, when they declared the AO8 void!!!

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FAO would like to express its appreciation to Philippines for providing valuable information on the process of GM food safety assessment in Philippines. There are various ways and approaches that can be taken to set up GM food safety assessment process at national level, but for countries with limited experience, the real-life examples can be the best teacher. Visit <http://tiny.cc/FAO-GM-PHL> to further read about the country profile of Philippines on GM food safety assessment and review their submitted records.

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