Technical Consultation on Low Levels of

Genetically Modified (GM) Crops in International Food and Feed Trade

Opening speech, Dr Maria Helena Semedo, Deputy Director-General, Coordinator Natural Resources

Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO)

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Ladies and gentlemen,

Welcome to this Technical Consultation on Low Levels of Genetically Modified Crops in International Food and Feed Trade.

This meeting is organized at the request of FAO Member States. The 148th Session of the FAO Council, held in December 2013, supported the proposal, noting that FAO had conducted technical analysis on the topic, and it took the decision taking into account the relevance of the competencies of other international organizations and bodies. Council also noted that the Technical Consultation would not be considering the establishment of standards or other types of norms and that it was not intended to be an event to reach policy agreement.

So, FAO serves as a neutral forum to convene a meeting that has a very clear focus: for the next two days, you will be considering technical issues related to the use of genetically modified crops. The consultation will be a first step towards resolving potential trade disruptions involving low levels of GM crops in international food and feed trade.

Before you do that, I would like to invite you first to take a look at the big picture.

By 2050, world agriculture will need to produce 60 percent more food globally, and developing countries are expected to double their production. The agriculture sector is also expected to produce more non-food products, especially for energy (liquid biofuels, wood) and feed.

At the same time as the demand for food increases, the natural resources upon which agriculture depends are increasingly threatened by environmental degradation, climate change, loss of biodiversity and ecosystem services.

To meet the challenges agriculture faces in the 21st century; we all agree that science and technology will need to play a key role.

Agricultural biotechnology represents a potential to reply to farmers demands. For example, in its recent book entitled "Biotechnologies at Work for Smallholders", FAO presented 19 case studies which demonstrated that, despite the complexities of smallholder farmer production systems, agricultural biotechnologies can represent powerful tools to benefit smallholder farmers given the appropriate conditions and enabling environment. Our challenge will be to facilitate access to new technologies for the smallholder farmers in order to boost their production.

Agricultural biotechnology represents a broad range of technologies, such as the genetic improvement of plant varieties and animal populations to increase their yields or efficiency; animal disease diagnosis; vaccine development; etc.

All potential research options should be kept on the table. Agricultural biotechnology can provide a powerful tool for the sustainable development of agriculture, forestry and fisheries.

Whereas the other biotechnologies are used, one of the tools in the biotechnology toolbox, genetic modification, has been at the centre of a major debate worldwide since the 1990s and has been the focus of continued media attention.

This long-running debate about GMOs has led to the other non-GMO biotechnologies being overshadowed.

I would like to emphasize that:

FAO is aware of the ongoing discussions that genetic modification could eventually have the potential to help increase production and productivity in agriculture and thus contribute to food security.

But, FAO is also aware of the concern about the potential risks that genetically modified organisms (GMOs) pose regarding the effects on human and animal health and the environment.

FAO supports the careful evaluation of the potential benefits and possible risks associated with the application of GMOs based on scientific evidence and a case-by-case approach.

We strongly believe, it is up to individual governments to make decisions regarding the development, testing or release of any specific GMO in their country. Governments should also ensure that consumers have the right to be informed and to decide whether or not they want to eat foods containing GMOs.

On relevant and other topics, FAO can also support the development of international standards and helps frame international conventions and agreements. Particularly relevant for this role is the fact that FAO hosts bodies such as the Commission on Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture (CGRFA), the Joint FAO/WHO Codex Alimentarius Commission, among others.

Ladies and gentlemen,

FAO is here today acting as a neutral broker between its Members, providing a neutral forum for a technical consultation to address disruptions involving low levels of GM crops in international food and feed trade.

With this in mind, I am happy to welcome here today representatives from the Codex Alimentarius Commission, United Nations Environment Programme, World Health Organization and the World Trade Organization and other relevant organizations and bodies to join this meeting.

In concluding, I hope that this Consultation will contribute to an increased awareness about the subject and possible impacts on food security and to an improved understanding and recognition of various points of view regarding the issue from relevant stakeholders.

Thank you.