

Interview with a Focal Point: Mexico - Sol Ortiz García

“Inter-ministerial collaboration: There are more issues that unite us than those that separate us”

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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 Sol Ortiz García, the Focal Point for Mexico, who is a risk manager/communicator.

Before the interview session started, she thanked FAO for the opportunity to be interviewed, and commented that it is an interesting effort to have Focal Points share their national experiences with others.

Interviewer: Please tell us about you and your background.



Mexico’s Focal Point is a great basketball player!

Sol Ortiz García (Sol): I am the Executive Secretary at the Comisión Intersecretarial de Bioseguridad de los Organismos Genéticamente Modificados (CIBIOGEM) which is a part of the Federal Executive Branch responsible for setting policies on Biosafety concerning the safe use of genetically modified organisms (GMO). CIBIOGEM is composed of heads of various Secretaries including health, agriculture & livestock and environment & natural resources. I work with different competent authorities in the country to update the data on the National Information System on Biosafety. This Information System includes National Register on Biosafety of GMOs that publishes the GM food safety assessment results on our website. I have been involved in the environmental risk assessment of GMOs since 2001. I am a Biologist and I have a PhD in Ecology.

Interviewer: How and why were you nominated by your Government to be the Focal Point to the FAO GM Foods Platform?

Sol: CIBIOGEM is the National Focal Point to the Cartagena Protocol. Since we work with the different authorities to update the information in the National Register on Biosafety of GMOs, we



were contacted by the Codex Contact Point of Mexico to become the Focal Point to the FAO GM Foods Platform. Our previous work experience in contributing to different platforms and representing Mexico in various international fora also makes us competent to be the Focal Point.

Interviewer: Do you have guidelines 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?

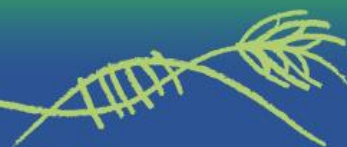
Sol: Yes, the Evidence and Risk Management Commission has specific guidelines that are in line with the Codex guidelines. These guidelines can be found at http://conacyt.gob.mx/cibiogem/images/cibiogem/sistema_nacional/registro/protocolo_evaluacion_riesgo_ogms3.pdf.

Interviewer: What is the process of the safety assessment once you receive an application?

Sol: The safety assessment of GMOs for human use and for food is carried out by the Federal Commission for the Protection against Sanitary Risk (COFERPRIS). This organization, the technical branch of the Mexican Secretariat of Health, is responsible in authorizing the imports and commercialization of GM foods. First, the applicant submits the dossier to the General Service Center, after which, it goes to the Sanitary Authorization Commission that verifies the completion of the application and handles the initial administrative processes. The next step is to hand over the application to the Evidence and Risk Management Commission. The Commission is responsible for conducting the food safety assessment. The risk-safety assessment team consists of one full time biotechnologist and four expert assessors who work on the team part time – a biologist, a molecular biologist and two statisticians. According to our regulations, they have 6 months to conduct the safety assessment and provide the results back to the Sanitary Authorization Commission, the responsible body to release the Authorization when it is granted. If there is missing information or the need for further information from the applicant, then the timing is halted so that the extra information can be provided. The CIBIOGEM comes into picture when the records need to be published on the different databases. In our CIBIOGEM office, we are a team of 12. Four of us are responsible to carry out all the administrative issues and eight of us carry out the substantive and technical duties including coordination with the different ministries and management of research projects on biosafety and biotechnology.

Interviewer: What are some of the challenges that you face as the Focal Point?

Sol: Due to the multidisciplinary nature of the topic of biosafety, it is essential for us to work with different ministries with different mandates and different systems for priority-setting. Thus a big challenge we often face is the difficulty in bringing different ministries together and constantly reminding ourselves of the major common goals, towards which we have to work together for the country. In order to address this challenge, effective communication is required even with the general public on the process of GM food safety assessment. For this purpose, CIBIOGEM conducts various workshops, seminars and awareness programmes. One of such programmes organized by



the National Council of Science and Technology is called “week for science”. During the week, we interact with both children and adults to inform them about the work that CIBIOGEM conducts, and also provide interactive tools, games and easy explanation for them to learn about basic concepts of GMOs, including what a DNA is, how GMOs are constructed and what regulations exist in the country for the safety of GM foods. These programmes have been successful and participants appreciate the learning opportunity. However we also recognize that these efforts still have limited outreach considering that our country has a population of 120 million people.

Interviewer: Do you have any tips for countries with little experience with collecting data from various agencies/ministries on GM food safety assessment?

Sol: It is important to identify what unites all of us in a country and to focus on achieving the goals of the country. This would be the healthiest way for any government to make important decisions. There are more issues that unite us than those that separate us. Also, let us not try to reinvent the wheel. To learn from good practises of countries with experience in GM foods is a smarter way to develop policies in your own country. Of course, it is necessary to adapt and tailor these practises according to your country situation, capacities and needs.

FAO would like to express its appreciation to Sol Ortiz García for providing valuable information on the process of GM food safety assessment in Mexico. 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-MEX> to further read about the country profile of Mexico on GM food safety assessment and review their submitted records.

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