FAO GM Foods Platform

Interview with a Focal Point: Argentina – Martin Lema

"Codex guidelines are the basis for any country to base their respective GM food safety assessment guidelines on"

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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 Martin Lema, the Focal Point for Argentina. Martin Lema is a risk manager for GM Food safety assessment whereas he plays the role of a risk assessor for the environmental risk assessment of GM Foods.

Interviewer: Could you please tell us about yourself and your background?

Martin Lema (Martin): I am the Director of Biotechnology in the Ministry of AgroIndustry in Argentina and I have been in this post for four years. I am also the Chair of the Biosafety Commission on AgBiotechnology (CONABIA). The commission has been assigned the Centre of reference for biosafety of GMOs by the FAO. I am also a professor of Ag-biotechnology at the National University in Quilmes in Argentina – where I pursued my studies in Biotechnology.

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

Martin: I was the lead in the Codex delegation task force for new guidelines prepared for Low Level Presence (LLP) of r-DNA plant materials in food from 2005-2007. Since the Ministry of AgroIndustry in Argentina is the regulatory body for GMOs, I was chosen to be the focal point to the Platform.

Interviewer: Are you a risk assessor or a risk manager?

Martin: I am a risk manager with regards to the field of GM biosafety and food safety assessment. In particular, I am a member of the commission for the GM food safety assessment in Argentina.

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?

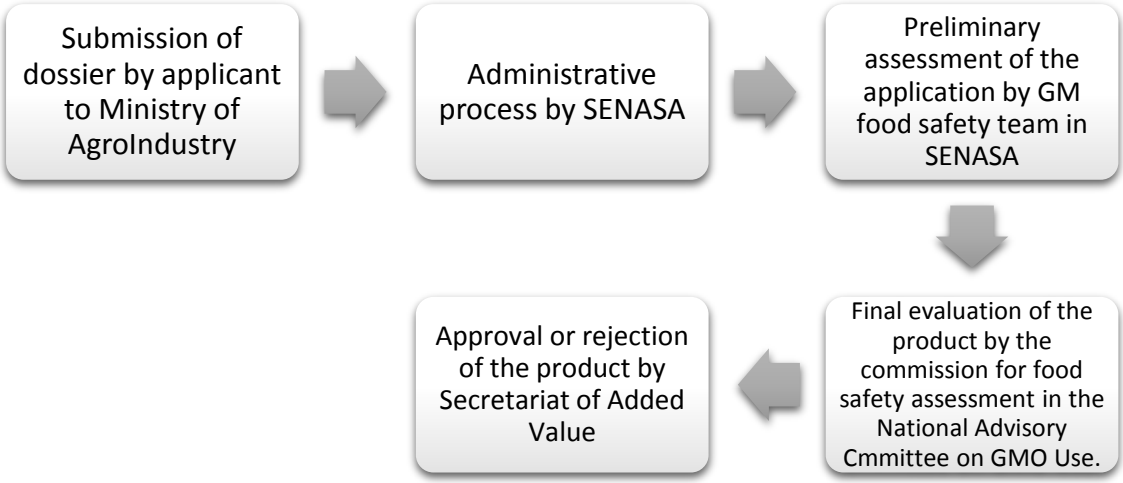
Martin: Yes, we do have regulations for GM Food safety assessment in Argentina which are purely based on the Codes guidelines for plants.

Interviewer: How many people are there in the GM food safety assessment team? What sort of expertise do they possess?

Martin: We are a team of about 10 people in the technical group for the GM Food safety assessment. The team has nutritionists, toxicologists, biotechnologists who have undergone training in allergenicity, molecular biologists, agronomists and medical doctors.

Interviewer: Could you please tell us the process of the GM Food safety assessment in Argentina from the point of receipt of the dossier from an applicant?

Martin: The first step of the applicant is to submit the dossier to the National Service for Agrifood Quality and Health (SENASA) under the Ministry of AgroIndustry. Technicians in SENASA do a preliminary completeness check. Once the preliminary assessment is complete, the dossier is handed over to the commission convened for the final evaluation of the scientific report. The commission consists of scientists and experts from universities, research institutions and other associations. The opinion of the commission is then handed over to the Secretariat of Added Value who is the competent authority and makes the final decision, i.e., the approval or rejection of the release of the GMO. However, the evaluation of the GMO is done for environment, food safety and production and trade after which the final approval is made.



Interviewer: As a Focal Point, what are some of the challenges that you face?

Martin: Initially, when we started conducting GM Food safety assessment, the only communication made once it was reviewed was whether the product approval was positive or negative. There was no detailed information about the safety assessment or a decision document as it is usually conceived. Since the launch of the FAO databases for GM Food safety assessment, there has been a need to modify this communication in order to include more scientific information, and to include specific details for readers interested in the technical details. Thus, we need to improve our documentation and this is a challenge.

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

Martin: Of course, due to the different country situations, the development of a structure for GM food safety assessment is done on a case by case basis. However, Codex guidelines are the basis for any country to base their respective GM food safety assessment guidelines on and thus countries developing their guidelines should always follow the Codex guidelines. It is important to remember that one of the mandates of the Platform was the effective utilization of food safety assessment in situations of LLP of r-DNA plant materials in food.

FAO would like to express its appreciation to Martin Lema for providing valuable information on the process of GM food safety assessment in Argentina. 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-ARG to further read about the country profile of Argentina on GM food safety assessment and review their submitted records.