



Leaders in Environmental Management

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Testing to begin on genetically modified food

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Independent tests on the health effects of genetically modified crops, due to start soon in South Africa, have been welcomed by watchdog groups.

The tests will start soon at the University of the Free State's Genetically Modified Organisms Testing Facility. Professor Chris Viljoen, who heads the independent testing facility, said that trials with animals should take about three years to complete. After these, the testing facility would look at general allergic responses in humans.

Leslie Liddell, Director of Biowatch, a non-governmental watchdog group, said so far studies on GM crops which have been released and commercialised suggested there were no long-term negative impacts.

"But in many cases scientists linked to the clutch of powerful multinational companies which dominate the seed industry have conducted these tests."

GM crops have been in South Africa since 1997 and the country is one of only eight countries world-wide which grow GM crops commercially.

Tests undertaken by the testing facility last year showed that 90 percent of soy products and 61 percent of maize products tested contained traces of GMOs. Increasingly GM products are sneaking into the food chain.

In the absence of compulsory separation and labelling of GM products, South African consumers have been deprived of their right to choose whether to eat GM food. And farmers who opt for the GM-free route are being prejudiced.

Fifteen small-scale farmer groups have endorsed a Biowatch South Africa statement calling for compulsory labelling and separation of GM products. Twenty-five scientists have also called for certain criteria to be met before the commercial release of a GMO.