

Over sh60b spent on biotech research

By Christopher Bendana

The Government has spent sh60b on biotechnology research since the first biotech lab was established at the National Agricultural Research Laboratories, Kawanda.

The amount was revealed by Dr Barbara Zawedde, the co-ordinator Uganda Biosciences Information Center, a NARO information hub, during the launch of the International Service for the Acquisition of Agri-Biotech Application (ISAAA) 2016 Global Report at Hotel Africana in Kampala on Thursday.

Presenting a paper, "Overview of the Application of Modern Biotechnology in Uganda", Zawedde said this money should not go to waste. They have also built labs and bred different crops to address different challenges.

Modern biotechnology, also known as genetic engineering, allows scientists to transfer genes between species with precision. The challenges

Recent new bio crops in Kenya include eggplant, potatoes and sugar bee

range from pests and diseases, climate change leading to prolonged drought and low nutrition value in some of Uganda's staple foods (bananas and cassava).

Zawedde said science was answering challenges depending on specific area's needs. She urged that while Europe's needs were children with improved IQ, hence their interest in gene selection for better intelligence, our current situation needs were to address nutritional and climate change issues.

Resistant crops

A banana resistant to the virulent banana bacteria wilt has been bred at the National Laboratories Research Institute Kawanda, as well as a cassava resistant to the Cassava brown streak disease at the National Crops Resources Research Institute Namulonge.

The two crops and maize offer employment and income to millions of Ugandans.

Other advanced successful genetic research has been on Water Efficient Maize for Africa, NEWEST rice for nitrogen absorption and Irish Potatoes, where breeders at Kachwekano Zonal Agricultural Research and Development Institute in Kabale district have also bred an Irish potato resistant to late blight disease.

Christopher Kibazanga, the state minister for agriculture, said the Government wants the National Biotechnology and Biosafety Bill 2012



Dr Geoffrey Arinaitwe, a banana biofortification co-principle investigator, showing off transgenic bananas in a greenhouse

passed quickly to address agricultural challenges. He asked the scientists to explain some of the benefits to the MPs so that they pass the Bill.

Faith Nguthi, an official from the regional ISAAA office, Nairobi, said more biotech crops were being introduced, giving farmers and consumer multiple options. Recent new crops include eggplant, potatoes and sugar bee.

ISAAA is an international

organisation that tracks agro-biotech adoption across the globe.

The 2016 reports says the US has the largest GMO crop, with 72 million ha acreage while Brazil is second with 49 million acres. In Africa, South Africa leads with 2.7 million hectares.

The Bill, which is supposed to regulate the technology was last week, for the second time referred for further consultation by the Deputy Speaker of Parliament, Jacob Oulanyah.