

GOVT WANTS A NOAH'S ARK FACILITY SET UP TO PROTECT INDIGENOUS CROPS AND ANIMALS

Government reviews GMO Bill

By Henry Sekanjako

The Government has introduced new proposals for the amendment of the National Biotechnology and Biosafety Act, 2012, which was rejected by President Yoweri Museveni.

In December last year, the President declined to assent to the Bill, citing lack of protection for consumers, indigenous crops and animals by the Bill.

The Government re-tabled the Bill before Parliament for re-consideration, so that the President's concerns could be addressed.

Presenting the new proposed amendments before the Parliament's committee on science and technology, the Minister of State for Science, Technology and Innovation, Elioda Tumwesigye, said Cabinet, chaired by President Museveni, recently established a cabinet sub-committee to review the Bill.

"A Cabinet sub-committee chaired by the Prime Minister was put in place to discuss the President's concerns, for which we came up with responses and proposals, which the President agreed to," Tumwesigye told the MPs.



Elioda Tumwesigye

In the new amendments, Cabinet resolved to change the title of the Bill, from the National Biotechnology and Biosafety Act, to Genetic Engineering and Biosafety Act.

It should be noted that President Museveni, in one of the grounds for declining to assent to the Act, questioned the Bill's title.

"I am writing in connection with the biosafety law, which in fact means genetic engineering. Why was it not named clearly?" asked the President in his letter to the Speaker of Parliament, Rebecca Kadaga.

The Cabinet also introduced

BETWEEN THE LINES:

- The President declined to assent to the GMO Bill citing lack of protection for indigenous crops.
- Cabinet wants the Bill's title changed from National Biotechnology and Biosafety Act to Genetic Engineering and Biosafety Act.

a new clause to the Bill, which states that a person who engages in a genetic engineering activity shall enter into a benefit sharing agreement with the community in which the activity is taking place.

According to the Government, this is in accordance, with the National Environment (Access to genetic resources and benefit sharing regulations 2005, No 30 of 2005).

To distinguish organic and genetically modified agricultural products, the Government wants clause 26 of the Bill amended to add a phrase "contains genetically engineered material" for labelling purposes.

"A person involved in the

research, development, general release, importation, transit or exportation and trade of a genetically engineered material shall ensure that the genetically engineered material or genetically engineered product is clearly labelled," Tumwesigye told MPs.

President Museveni pointed out the labelling of GMO products as one of the concerns the Bill needed to address before he assents to it.

In his letter to Parliament, the President stated that: "The labelling must be clear, and failure to label the GMO products, should attract severe punishment."

To address the President's concerns, Cabinet resolved that GMO products should be labelled, to say: "May contain genetically engineered material or contains genetically engineered material."

The Government also committed that the law provides for measures to ensure the preservation of indigenous materials in accordance with section 16 (2), and that there is need to establish a fully fledged modern national gene bank on a wider scale.

In his letter to Parliament,

Museveni asked the agriculture minister to work out a plan for a Noah's Ark, where all Uganda's indigenous material (plants and animals) will be kept uncontaminated by any GMO, for future use if there is any crisis within the modernisation efforts.

Meanwhile, the committee, chaired by Nakifuma County MP Kafeero Ssekitooleko, told the minister that they would digest the new proposals as they receive more views from different stakeholders.

The committee, which started fresh hearings about the Bill on Friday last week, is set to interact with various stakeholders, such as scientists, farmer groups and civil society organisations.

In October 2017, Parliament passed the National Biotechnology and Biosafety Act 2012, to allow Ugandan farmers access genetically engineered products to boost agriculture biotechnology research.

Before its passage into law, the Bill faced criticism from various stakeholders, who feared it would affect Uganda's organic crop varieties, such as organic bananas.