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Fact Sheet: Summary of USDA Efforts to Address Final Recommendations by the Advisory Committee on Biotechnology & 21st Century Agriculture (AC21)

Background

The Advisory Committee on Biotechnology and 21st Century Agriculture (AC21) was reactivated in spring 2011 by Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack to focus on a key issue associated with the increasing complexity and diversity of U.S. agriculture, namely, coexistence and the interactions between different forms of agricultural production. The committee as constituted is composed of 23 members from 16 states and the District of Columbia. The members represent a broad range of interests and expertise: farming communities, the seed industry, the biotechnology industry, the organic food industry, State government, food manufacturers, consumer and community development groups, the medical profession, and academic researchers. Specifically, the AC21 was charged by the Office of the Secretary with addressing the following questions:

1. What types of compensation mechanisms, if any, would be appropriate to address economic losses by farmers in which the value of their crops is reduced by unintended presence of genetically engineered (GE) material(s)?
2. What would be necessary to implement such mechanisms? That is, what would be the eligibility standard for a loss and what tools and triggers (e.g., tolerances, testing protocols, etc.) would be needed to verify and measure such losses and determine if claims are compensable?
3. In addition to the above, what other actions would be appropriate to bolster or facilitate coexistence among different agricultural production systems in the United States?

In the past, other groups—inside and outside of government—tasked with formulating broadbased recommendations to bolster coexistence have failed to move the conversation forward. The AC21 met five times beginning in August 2011 to address the committee's charge. Not until the final meeting did it become clear that members would join in near consensus on a set of recommendations to USDA. In the end, a final report entitled, "Enhancing Coexistence: A Report to the Secretary of Agriculture," was presented to Secretary Vilsack on Nov. 19, 2012, having been endorsed by 22 of 23 AC21 members. The report made recommendations in five major areas: potential compensation mechanisms, stewardship, education and outreach, research, and seed quality. In doing so, the range of activities needed to address the recommendations is extensive. When presented, USDA recognized the report as the culmination of a great deal of hard work and complex discussion and review. At the time, USDA also committed to reviewing

the report and considering how best to move forward. Some recommendations require a considerable amount of preparatory work or research before they can be acted upon. This outline represents the first phase of activities in response to the AC21's work and recommendations—namely, those activities we intend to complete by the end of 2013. Additional updates on other activities can be expected. As USDA considers the regulatory and legal authorities, funding parameters and the broad partnerships required to implement the committee's recommendations, we also understand the need to work with Congress and our stakeholders going forward.

Summary of Efforts

Research Efforts

- Develop research plans and recommendations to:
 - Develop a thorough inventory of USDA data that helps to quantify economic losses incurred by farmers;
 - Gather data on unintended GE presence in commercial non-GE seed supplies intended for identity-preserved production;
 - Gather data required to evaluate actuarial soundness of potential compensation mechanisms;
 - Assess mitigation techniques to minimize gene flow; and
 - Evaluate the efficacy of best practices needed to develop standards for joint coexistence plans and determine what additional research is needed.
- Encourage the SARE (Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education program) regional councils to move coexistence concepts into field operations.
- Develop monitoring procedures for transgenic alfalfa pollen load and for assessing transgenic presence; this effort will be an important building block for field-based tools.
- Continue to involve the outside scientific community. The FY2013 Request for Applications for the Biotech Risk Assessment Grant program was published in December 2012 and included topics responsive to several AC21 recommendations; the resulting grants will be selected and announced by September, 2013.
- Offer competitive funding for a conference of experts to focus on research and information gaps around mitigation techniques to minimize gene flow.

Outreach Efforts

- Seek public input through the Federal Register on how to foster communication and collaboration to strengthen coexistence and host a workshop to exchange ideas on strengthening coexistence.
- Gather case studies to understand challenges faced by various producers. Ensure that information gathered from organic and IP producer groups is then utilized when developing improvements sought by those producers.
- Work with the seed industry on complementary educational or marketing material on available stewardship tools and farmer-to-farmer communication that might accompany seed sales.

Potential Compensation Mechanisms

- Execute Research and Outreach plans, as above.

- Review NASS data from the 2011 organic production survey to evaluate organic prices for additional crops under Federal Crop Insurance Program for the 2014 crop year, and adjust the actuarial structure for crops with adequate data.
- Investigate expanding crop policies that allow growers to use their base contract price as the price election. For example, if a crop is produced with organic farming practices, the base contract price would include the premium amount.
- Begin recognizing some organic prices under the Noninsured Crop Disaster Assistance Program (NAP) for 2014, with sufficient price and yield data.
- Investigate the possibility of eliminating all crop insurance surcharges for organic crops.

Seed Quality Efforts

- Launch the National Genetic Resources Advisory Council, hold a first meeting before mid-Spring, and request that, as one of its first tasks, it evaluate the availability of non-GE seed for producers serving GE-sensitive markets. Evaluate how USDA may help to strengthen the Organic Seed Finders database.
- Review and evaluate current practices for testing, monitoring and maintaining the purity of publicly held germplasm; as needed, plan for updating and strengthening those practices.

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