



Driving biosafety research on GM plants

★ Objective information needs to be provided for the public, politicians, risk-assessors and the media regarding the biosafety research on genetically modified plants, says **Professor Joachim Schiemann** of BIOSAFENET, whose project is seeking to address the imbalance of research dissemination in this field

Currently, objectivity in the longstanding and hotly debated topic of the safety of transgenic crops is being undermined by a lack of cohesion and the lack of a strong scientific base. Widespread research and comprehensive results which address many of the questions on this now controversial subject, are being sidelined or ignored, creating a worrying trend of counterproductivity. Further, these problems are intensified by a penchant of the media to cherry pick inconclusive or negative articles on the safety of genetically modified organisms – of which there are very few compared to a substantial body supporting them – and disseminating this biased and unsubstantiated information to the public. This only serves to skew the perception of a salient and, potentially, beneficial field.

The BIOSAFENET project is an EU funded network of European scientists dedicated to the impartial bundling of biosafety knowledge for the socio-political decision-making framework and the responsible and sustainable application of such technology in the agricultural industry and the food industry.

Indeed, this project appears particularly timely considering that genetically modified crops are grown worldwide on 125 million hectares. Professor Joachim Schiemann, coordinator of BIOSAFENET, elaborates on the aims and objectives of the project. “BIOSAFENET aims to strengthen and focus the voice of biosafety research on the European and international level, since biosafety research is the basis for environmental risk assessment and also the management of genetically modified organisms,” he notes. However, Schiemann is quick to highlight that the project is not pro or con genetically modified organisms. “We are trying to provide the basis for the environmental risk assessment and, as a consequence, management by supporting science-based and neutral biosafety research on genetically modified organisms,” he explains. “In the BIOSAFENET project we are not performing environmental risk assessment but we are providing the scientific basis for it.”

Disseminating information

The BIOSAFENET project facilitates this impartial distribution of current research and information through networking activities, international seminars, Internet-based Web-portals and press events, represented in activities such as:

- The co-organisation of the International Symposia on the Biosafety of Genetically Modified Organisms (ISBGMO), which constitutes the sole internationally recognised forum on the topic
- Integration of scientists from the new EU Member States and the fostering of biosafety research within Europe through scientific cooperation with European institutions and authorities such as the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA)
- Provision of a data bank illuminating the goals, methods and results of international projects and thereby making biosafety research more transparent

- Establishment of a comprehensive information platform to political representatives, stakeholders and the public at large
- The conduction of a series of international expert seminars to provide recommendation reports on specific biosafety topics

Such well established networking platforms and communication channels also represent an added value for national research projects. "Our activities also enabled biosafety projects in several European countries to present their results to a broader audience and to bundle the information flow to relevant stakeholders."

BIOSAFENET also regularly publishes articles in the highly reputable journal *Environmental Biosafety Research* (EBR). This journal is published by the International

are invited as well as the advisory board and the scientific community," describes Schiemann. "There we will discuss how we can continue our activities, how to produce objective biosafety results and how to get the relevant information for environmental risk assessment. Then we will have an exhibition where BIOSAFENET, the Public Research and Regulation Initiative (PRRI), ISBR, the Internet information platform GMO-Safety.eu and the International Centre for Genetic Engineering and Biotechnology (ICGEB) will present information packages and discuss their activities. In the afternoon we will hold a press conference and then we will have a discussion with German stakeholders. There the idea is to inform the public about how and where to find objective information about biosafety research and its results, including some background information about genetically modified organisms."

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Society for Biosafety Research (ISBR), the global umbrella group that fosters communication and technical exchange among biosafety experts and dialogue with the public. "Four of our international seminars have already been performed and two are planned for May and June this year," states Schiemann. "They are organised by leaders in their fields to discuss hot and very important topics in biosafety research. These experts then invite a further 15 to 20 other professionals to discuss biosafety issues in order to provide a recommendation paper at the end of the seminar. This recommendation paper is then published in *Environmental Biosafety Research*."

Typically – with BIOSAFENET now in its final year – the project's final conference, entitled: How to strengthen the voice of biosafety research in the public debate of GM plants, takes place on the 29 June in Berlin, Germany. Here the milestones achieved by the BIOSAFENET project in the strengthening of a substantial network of biosafety researchers worldwide will come into focus. "In the morning of the event in Berlin we will have an international workshop, where our partners

Future proof

Interestingly, considering the nature of the BIOSAFENET field, the main hurdle to be overcome for the project to continue its activities is that of funding. There is currently no EU Seventh Framework call that would allow a continuation through EU funding. Despite this, Schiemann is keen to point out that the good work carried out through the BIOSAFENET project is being continued through many other institutions, projects and initiatives. "There are more than twenty projects in Germany funded by the Federal Ministry of Education and Research on a national level and there are also projects funded e.g. by Switzerland, several EU member states, by the USA and China," enthuses Schiemann. "Plus, of course the International Society for Biosafety Research will continue in networking, and with its scientific journal and the organisation of bi-annual international symposia. Indeed, the next symposium (11th ISGBMO) will take place in November next year in Buenos Aires, Argentina. ★

At a glance

Full Project Title

Biosafety Research Communication Network (BIOSAFENET)

W: www.gmo-safety.eu

Project Objectives

The goal of BIOSAFENET is robust public information on the biosafety research conducted on genetically modified plants. BIOSAFENET and other European initiatives contribute to the bundling of biosafety knowledge from various EU research programmes and from existing European GMO biosafety networks

Project Partners

- Julius Kühn Institute, JKI, Germany
- International Centre for Genetic Engineering and Biotechnology, ICGEB, Italy
- Agricultural Research Centre of Hungarian Academy of Sciences, ARI, Hungary
- Genius GmbH, GENIUS, Germany
- National Hellenic Research Foundation, NHRF, Greece

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Project Coordinator

Professor Joachim Schiemann graduated from Martin-Luther-University, Halle, in 1977. Presently, he is head of the Institute for Biosafety of Genetically Modified Plants belonging to the Julius Kühn Institute (JKI), Federal Research Centre for Cultivated Plants. Joachim is also an honorary Professor at the University of Lüneburg and, since 2006, has been coordinator of the EU-funded SSA project BIOSAFENET (Biosafety Research Communication Network).

