

## Maple Leaves, Moringa Trees and More: National Biotechnology Weeks in Canada and the Philippines

**SUMMARY:** Canada and the Philippines each organise “National Biotechnology Week” events every year. Activities include career fairs, tours of biotech companies, news features, political speeches and outreach, and other programmes to simultaneously reach different sections of society on a national basis.

Canada and the Philippines are on opposite ends of the planet, and have very different cultures and economies. But they’ve independently hit on a common strategy to increase public awareness of biotechnology: convening **National Biotechnology Week** events.

### Maple leaves and moringa trees

In both countries, National Biotechnology Week (NBW) is an opportunity to feature national leadership and homegrown applications of all aspects of the technology. In Canada, all NBW activities across the vast country are identified with a common logo featuring the iconic national maple leaf with a genome intertwined. In the Philippines, the annual NBW trade fair celebrates ways that biotechnology tools can be used to discover new uses and unique properties for homegrown natural resources such as the locally common moringa tree (or malunggay).

National Biotechnology Week in both countries celebrates the full range of biotechnology tools and applications. Medical, industrial and basic research aspects of biotechnology are explored and agricultural biotechnology gets special attention in both places because significant areas of these crops are grown. In the Philippines, where agriculture is an important part of the economy and provides livelihood to a significant part of the country’s labour force, up to 60 percent of the NBW activities feature some aspect of agricultural biotechnology.



### Key audiences

In both countries, organisers aim to raise awareness among the general public about biotechnology through events and news coverage. BIOTECCanada estimates annual cumulative attendance at all events in a year to be between 5,000-6,000 people across the country, with media impressions in the millions. In the Philippines, most activities take place in the national capital of Manila but the general public is encouraged to participate through advance publicity around the country, and national media coverage of NBW activities.

But both countries also make efforts to reach specific audiences as well. For example, one key audience in the Philippines is journalists. The Jose G. Burgos Jr. Awards for Biotechnology Journalism, named for a renowned advocate for press freedom and supporter of biotechnology, are announced every year during NBW. These awards recognise journalists who write outstanding news and feature stories on biotechnology in national newspapers.

In Canada, students at all levels can find activities designed to reach out to them through opportunities to meet scientists and businesspeople and learn about careers in biotechnology. One organisation in Canada has hosted a “BIOlympics” for the past five years for students in grades 7 and 8 (ages 12-14), where schools compete to find out who knows the most about biotechnology.

Canada’s NBW also includes political outreach. Activities emphasise the contribution that biotechnology makes to economies at the provincial and national levels, and the policies that support and encourage the growth of the industry. One day of the week is always dedicated to visits with members of Canada’s Parliament, in the nation’s capital city Ottawa, organised by BIOTECCanada.

### Success from grassroots and being inclusive

In both countries, grassroots participation helps make NBW happen. Although national organising groups set the dates and a few parameters on activities, they rely on government bodies, industry players, academic institutions and other groups to propose, fund and implement most activities. In Canada, the national organisers provide logos and common promotional material, and in the Philippines the government chair of the steering committee sets the annual theme and holds opening and closing events – but everything else is left in the hands of the organisations working in biotechnology. This freedom to organise events based on local interests inspires creative activities in both countries.

Being inclusive is a key feature of NBW in both countries. BIOTECCanada credits an ever-growing list of private and public supporters and participants from all aspects of biotechnology as critical to its success in developing relevant and popular programmes. In the Philippines, all parts of the government are involved in planning for NBW, including the Departments of Science & Technology, Agriculture, Education, Environment and Natural Resources, Health, Interior and Local Government, Trade and Industry (DTI). Other non-governmental organisations that are involved include the Biotechnology Coalition of the Philippines, Biotechnology Information and Organisation Network, Biotechnology for Life Media Advocacy Resource Center, Commission on Higher Education and Philippine Information Agency.

### A once-a-year programme with year-round benefits

Organisers of National Biotechnology Week say that working with people around the country who are involved in biotechnology year-round, and encouraging them all to talk about it at the same time for a week, gives a special level of prominence to the role that biotechnology plays in everyday life. By bringing people together, face-to-face, to discuss, debate and celebrate the role that biotechnology plays in the country, practitioners and the public alike find new answers and new energy for the year ahead.

