

The Pan-Asia Farmers (and Scientists and Journalists) Exchange: Regional Education on Fertile Ground

SUMMARY: Through the Pan-Asia Farmers Exchange Program, people from across the region learn about the practicalities of regulating and growing biotech crops. What began as a way to share information among farmers is now informing a much broader group of stakeholders on the impacts and benefits of biotechnology in the Philippines, where these crops have been grown for over six years.



Since 2007, the annual Pan-Asia Farmers Exchange Program has served as an increasingly popular platform for knowledge sharing and exchange on crops of agricultural biotechnology. Organised jointly by CropLife Asia, CropLife Philippines, the Biotechnology Coalition of the Philippines and the SEARCA Biotechnology Information Center, the three-day program aims to enhance the knowledge of farmers and other biotechnology stakeholders about biotech crops, demonstrate how a regulatory framework for crop biotechnology works in

practice, and promote regional knowledge-sharing and agriculture networks.

Where better to see the real impacts of biotechnology on farmers, the environment, communities and research than the Philippines, which has been growing these crops since 2003?

Beyond a “Farmers Exchange”

Farmers have been at the heart of this program since its inception, building on a previous exchange begun in 2003 when Filipino farmers hosted farmers from other countries who were interested in seeing biotechnology crops for themselves. Those participants not only brought back information about biotechnology to their home countries, but they also went on to share their knowledge at regional events, and founded the Asia Farmers Network.

Other stakeholders learned about the exchange program and asked to join, and the program has grown to include 40 or more individuals from across Asia each year. What began as a “farmers’ exchange” now includes journalists, scientists and policy makers involved in agricultural biotechnology research and review. To date, participants have come from eight different countries across Asia – China, India, Indonesia, Korea, Philippines, Taiwan, Thailand and Vietnam – each at a different stage of evaluating, growing or consuming food from biotech crops.

Diverse participants and points of view

Farmers remain at the heart of the exchange program. Each is a leader in his or her agricultural community, and many hold leadership positions in farmer organisations or agribusiness operations, in addition to actively farming their own land. For example, members of the KTNA, an organisation to which more than 80 percent of Indonesian farmers belong, have participated for several years. These farmers ask tough questions of the farmers they meet about how biotechnology will impact them, and commit to sharing the answers with others at home.

The scientists who participate in the exchange program are also committed to asking questions in the Philippines. Many have their own active biotechnology research programs. Others serve as biotech regulators or are involved with regulatory processes in their home countries and gain understanding of the principles and practices that support biotechnology regulations in the Philippines. Whatever their position, all scientists find value in visiting advanced national and international biotechnology laboratories in the Philippines and seeing how biotechnology is actually used in the field, perhaps for the first time.

Media participants in the Farmers Exchange are from mainstream, national news organisations, who are seeking real-life stories about how biotechnology impacts farmers and consumers in the region. After the visit, the stories they publish help raise awareness about biotechnology more broadly throughout their countries. In Thailand, newspaper articles about the Farmers Exchange have been accompanied by radio broadcasts that reach across the country.

The benefits of such a diverse group of participants are clear. Each farmer or journalist or scientist now has the opportunity to see things from the perspectives of other stakeholders from other countries.



A complete biotech experience

Through various activities during the three-day intensive program, participants gain first-hand experience of how biotech crops are developed, how they are regulated by governments and how crops are managed at the farm level. Although some locations may vary, three elements form the core of the program every year.

Theory. The program begins with a series of interactive presentations on different components of agricultural biotechnology. These include seminars and technical briefings on biotech basics, biosafety regulations in the Philippines and specific crops such as insect-protected (Bt) corn and herbicide-tolerant corn.

Research. The next portion of the program focuses on biotechnology research and development activities. Visits are made to laboratories, greenhouses and research trial locations at the facilities of major international and national research centers in the Philippines, including the International Rice Research Institute, the Philippine Rice Research Institute and the University of the Philippines Los Banos-Institute of Plant Breeding. Here the participants can see crops that have been commercialised as well as active research on new traits for crops important in Asia, such as papaya and brinjal (eggplant).

Crops. Finally it's time to see commercial farms planting both biotech and conventional crops. Program participants interact directly with local farmers who have several years of experience with the technology and can show how it has impacted their farms, their incomes and their communities. Visiting multiple farms allows participants to see how biotechnology is used along with other conventional farming practices in different soils, geographies and climates.

A valuable exchange

After putting three long days into the program, the farmers, scientists and journalists who participate in the Pan-Asia Farmers Exchange have a wealth of new information. They are equipped to share their knowledge with others back home and to contribute to public dialogue about agriculture biotechnology. But perhaps most importantly, participants in the Farmers Exchange have first-hand experiences of biotechnology which enable them to judge for themselves how biotechnology impacts farmers, communities and the environment in Asia.