

**ICAC Bt Cotton conference Oct 29-31, 2007, Ouagadougou
Opening Speech for Charge d’Affaires David Brown**

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Hon. Minister of Agriculture...etc, etc.

Distinguished cotton experts, international scientists, respected delegates from the West and Central African countries, invitees from around the world, ladies and gentlemen...[ALL PROTOCOLS OBSERVED]

On behalf of the US government, I would like to welcome you to this expert consultation on biotechnology applications in cotton.

First, let me take this opportunity to thank the government of Burkina Faso for hosting this important international meeting. I would also like to thank the Burkinabe government for the proactive approach that it has taken toward moving forward on important innovations in agriculture, and in cotton in particular, both organic and Bt, the subject of this consultation. In June 2004, the governments of Burkina Faso and the U.S. organized a Ministerial Conference on “Harnessing Science and Technology to Increase Agricultural Productivity in Africa.” This conference had a major focus on biotechnology, particularly on the use of biotechnology crops.

The adoption of biotechnology crops is controversial in West Africa, with most countries in the region still grappling with establishing the required regulatory framework and building regulatory capacity, often in the face of public unease and international controversy over these technologies. However, as participants in this consultation will see firsthand tomorrow, Burkina Faso has been field testing Bt cotton for the past several years and has already acquired a significant amount of experience with this technology, while developing its regulatory capacity in this area. Innovations such as Bt cotton are destined to reach West Africa one day, and once again I would like to praise the Burkinabe government for its realism in the face of these worldwide trends.

I am no expert on cotton - let alone biotechnology cotton - but I would like to briefly share with you how the US government sees its role in this sphere. I want to stress from the outset that the USG does not see itself as a promoter of biotechnology crops, neither in West Africa, nor in southern Africa with respect to maize, or anywhere else. We do, however, want, through USAID, to assist the countries in the region and regional organizations to establish an appropriate framework and the technical competence to regulate transgenic commodities. All countries, whether or not they choose to allow the cultivation of biotechnology crops on a large scale, will need to have such a capacity. Second, we believe that all West African countries should be equipped with the requisite knowledge to make informed decisions on whether to take advantage of agricultural biotechnologies, based on the best available scientific and economic evidence.

Cotton is very important to a number of West and Central African economies, accounting for 5-10 percent of gross domestic product and 50-75 percent of exports; in West Africa alone, some 16 million people depend directly or indirectly on cotton cultivation. However, cotton prices have been dropping and inputs have been becoming more

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expensive, trends heightened by the recent sharp decline of the U.S. dollar against the Euro (and correspondingly the CEFA franc). It is more difficult for farmers to make a living from cotton. If the sector is to survive, farmers will need to grow cotton far more efficiently, that is, achieving a greater yield at a lower production cost. A number of initiatives have been launched to revitalize the cotton sector, including privatization of cotton parastatals, liberalization of the sector, as well as experimentation and preparing regulatory frameworks for the use of biotechnology crops.

The United States is one of 22 countries around the world that have adopted agricultural biotechnology since its introduction in the mid 1990s. Worldwide, farmers have adopted the technology at a rapid rate to take advantage of opportunities the technology offers to increase yields, decrease costs and decrease pesticide use. In 2006, 10.3 million farmers planted over 100 million hectares of biotechnology crops around the world. The U.S. is certainly leading in the adoption of biotechnology. In 2006, American farmers planted 89 percent of our soybean hectareage, 83 percent of our cotton hectareage, and 61 percent of our maize hectareage to varieties that had been improved through biotechnology. The technology has also been adopted in fresh food crops such as papaya, sweet corn and squash. Now several developing countries are among the leading adopters of the technology, namely Brazil, China, India, and South Africa. These four countries alone accounted for one-fifth of the total area planted to biotechnology crops in 2006.

Sponsoring meetings on biotechnology cotton such as this one is only one aspect of the USG support to cotton growers in West and Central Africa. We are also cooperating with Burkina Faso and other countries in the region through the \$27 million West African Cotton Improvement Program (WACIP). WACIP is focusing its efforts in a number of broad areas, including policy and institutional reform at the governmental level and increasing productivity at the farm level (including in the sphere of Bt cotton). A third theme of WACIP is increasing value added through transformation of raw cotton, including through facilitating deals with international companies for organic or fair trade cotton.

Finally, let me express the hope that the experts participating in this consultation will arrive at an objective assessment of the costs and benefits of growing Bt cotton in West and Central Africa. We must keep in mind that the questions are economic as well as technical. It will only make sense to adopt this exciting new technology if it brings practical benefits to the small-scale farmers in the region. Therefore, we look forward to hearing from the delegates present today from India, South Africa, Pakistan, China and Colombia, where small-holder farmers are growing Bt cotton, and to learning from their experiences. With this final thought, I will conclude these brief remarks by wishing you all good luck in your important work here in Ouagadougou.

Thank you very much.