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COMMENTS ON NEW UCS REPORT “FAILURE TO YIELD”

Washington, DC — With the occasion of the launch of the Union of Concerned Scientists (UCS) report, “Failure to Yield: The Unmet Promise of Genetically Engineered Crops in the US,” Kimberly Pfeifer, Head of Research at Oxfam America, made the following statement:

“The UCS offers a useful report for emphasizing and demonstrating what is commonplace knowledge:

1. That genetically engineered (GE) crops to date do not increase intrinsic yield
2. They are limited in improving yield (with the exception of Bt varieties)
3. Other approaches have demonstrated improvements to yield

“With this review in hand UCS rightly questions why GE technology receives such privileged attention over other approaches.

“The report is also timely for highlighting the shift in focus and the concerns that come with it. That research and development (R&D) in GE crops is shifting focus to address the current crises capturing the attention of policy-makers and the public—namely, the food prices crisis and climate change—there is a focus on crops to deal with drought tolerance, flooding, salinity, etc. But the jury is still out and we are not sure how soon this will change. Additionally, we will need to be cautious due to new complexities.

“While the report focused on US data, the findings complement and contribute to current thinking on issues of concern in considering the role of agriculture and how to invest for poverty reduction in developing countries. These concerns include:

1. Up to this point GE crop varieties have been largely irrelevant to significant portions of poor populations in developing countries as they do not address the production challenges or yield constraints resource poor farmers face; nor do they target the staple crops under cultivation (such as cow pea, millet, sorghum/cassava, quinoa, etc). About 40% of developing country farmer population lives on marginal lands and current varieties do not address their realities.
2. R&D and adoption of GE crops is very expensive and considering that over the past 2 decades investment in agriculture has actually been in decline, it would be a challenge or considerably risky for most developing countries to invest in a tool that has not proven significant yield improvements. Developing countries do face difficult challenges in deciding how to best invest in agriculture with scarce resources (or very constrained budgets).
3. Other approaches—such as low external input technologies, organic, integrated pest management—offer more affordable methods and hence more economically sustainable methods with the added benefits of being more environmentally sustainable.

“While Oxfam does not have a position on GE crops, it has publicly expressed in regards to food aid that governments and citizens receiving food aid have a right to decide whether they want to accept or not GE crops (foodstuffs) and if not they have a right to receive non-GE food assistance.

“From such a stance it would follow that supporting multiple local options in agricultural methods as UCS recommends for improving food availability in developing countries is a sound approach. Developing countries should have the policy space to make such decisions as they determine.”

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