Hannah Christine P. Ipapo 2019 - 46092

A Position Paper on Bt Talong

Eggplant remains to be a staple in Southeast Asian countries. Moreover, it proves to be the most important vegetable crop in the Philippines in terms of area and volume production, with an average of 21,225 hectares planted annually (ISAAA, 2020). In 2017, the industry reached a value of Php 5.1 billion. It is also a significant source of revenue for farmers, especially in Ilocos, Central Luzon, Cagayan Valley, CALABARZON, and the Bicol region. However, insect pests, parasites, and harsh environmental factors cause dire yield losses in its local production (ISAAA, 2020).

The Eggplant Fruit and Shoot Borer is the most harmful insect pest of eggplant in the country (FSB). To illustrate, according to ISAAA (2020), FSB can exacerbate yield losses ranging from 51% to 73%, causing Filipino farmers to spray chemical insecticides on a regular basis which shall cost them roughly 20-40% of the overall cost of chemical insecticide production. Therefore, farmers need more efficient pest control measures that do not need extra labor or resource inputs and are effective against the target insect pest.

Accordingly, scientists from the University of the Philippines Los Baños-Institute of Plant Breeding (UPLB-IPB) developed Bt eggplant to address this pressing issue. This genetically modified eggplant shall contain a gene from the soil bacterium *Bacillus thuringiensis* (Bt) that is expected to make it resistant to FSB (ISAAA, 2020).

In December 2015, however, the SC issued a ruling that stopped the conduction of field tests, dissemination, commercialization, and importation of GMOs, which environmentalist groups like Greenpeace Southeast Asia (Philippines), believe is harmful to humans and the ecosystem. The apex court further said that it examined the statements made by the scientists and found that they lack consensus regarding the safety and risks of Bt talong (Yap & Aning, 2013).
Having said that, it is my belief that *absolute safety*, which is proving that no harm exists at all, is far from attainable in any scientific method. Hence, the standard complied with in all plant genetic engineering regulations is *relative safety*. To elucidate, the principle of relative safety means that the proposed technology must be less detrimental than the current technology it attempts to supplement. Accommodating to this, the SC, therefore, should have assessed the safety of Bt eggplant relative to the alternatives, which are also imperfect, prior to the proclamation of its ruling.

Nevertheless, the SC overturned its decision in July 2016. The high court “granted the petitions for 9 motions for reconsideration filed by the Bt talong proponents”, and issued a new one, refuting the petition earlier filed, that year, by Greenpeace Southeast Asia Philippines and

Magsasaka at Siyentipiko sa Pagpapaunlad sa Agrikultura (MASIPAG) on the ground of mootness ("SC reverses earlier ruling", 2016).

In light of this, prospective farmer-adopters from the provinces of Laguna and Pangasinan voiced their complete support for Bt eggplant and its commercialization approval. "We're hoping it will be released soon so that we can benefit from it already," the farmers further relayed (Dionglay, 2020).

It cannot be denied that GMOs, among other alternatives, have the potential to achieve food security. After all, rendering Bt eggplant seeds available to farmers would definitely raise their income, while reducing its price for the consumers (Daway, 2016). Thus, I am inclined to encourage the nation to take a stand and move forward with initiatives aimed towards advancing biotechnology. I furthermore perceive the government's efforts to enact a new, more rigid set of guidelines that regulate the distribution, processing, and commercialization of genetically modified seeds, as a step in the right direction.

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