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NBA HOLDS MEETING WITH KEY STAKEHOLDERS TO EXPLAIN ITS MANDATE AND CLEAR THE MISINFORMATION

LUSAKA, ZAMBIA- THE National Biosafety Authority (NBA) today held a successful meeting with 42 key stakeholders at Cresta Golf View Hotel in Lusaka, to discuss some of the issues that have been raised in the recent past pertaining to the Authority's mandate.

The meeting hosted by the NBA was attended by among others Zambia Alliance for Agro-ecological Biodiversity (ZAAB), National Union for Small scale farmers of Zambia (NUSFAZ), Civil Society for Poverty Reduction (CSPR), Kasisi Agricultural Training Centre, Civil Society for Poverty Reduction (CSPR), Civil Society Organisation for Scaling up Nutrition (CSO-SUN), Africa Consumer Union (ACU), Community Technology Development Trust, Consumer Unity Trust Society (CUTS), Cotton Association of Zambia, DSAT Trust, Indaba Agricultural Policy Research Institution (IAPRI), Pick N Pay, Zambian Brands, Choppies, and Cotton Board of Zambia .

Zambia Alliance for Agro-ecological Biodiversity (ZAAB), Zambia Farmers Union (ZNFU), Civil Society for Poverty Reduction (CSPR) and other organisations have in the recent past issued statements on matters that pertain to the Authority's mandate and calling for the dissolution of the NBA Board.

Last week ZAAB on behalf of 30 other organisations issued a statement accusing the NBA of operating outside its mandate and alleging that the Authority has been collaborating with some foreign pro-GMO groups to 'radically change Zambia's No GMO status'.

NBA Chief Executive Officer Mr Lackson Tonga has described the stakeholder engagement as successful as it addressed key and important issues that have in the recent past been miscommunicated, thereby the public being misinformed on the NBA Mandate and its collaborations with its partners and key stakeholders.

"We have had a successful meeting. One of the main reasons of the meeting was also to get information from the concerned stakeholders and allow them to provide us with information on their concerns and allegations. We also had to explain and clear the misinformation that has been issued. Our observations and conclusion is that most of these institutions and organisations who have been issuing statements did not even have correct information on the NBA and some may be unfamiliar of the Act," he said.

Mr. Tonga explained that contrary to assertions that Zambia is a non GMO country, by virtue of having the Biosafety Act No 10 of 2007 in place, the country does allow for the import, transit, placing on the market, research, development, contained use as well as use as food, feed or processing of GMO but with authorization of the Authority after a risk assessment has been conducted. The Authority's mandate is to regulate research, development, application, importation, exportation, transit, contained use and/or placing on the market of any genetically modified organism or product of a genetically modified organism, whether intended for use as a pharmaceutical, food, feed or processing.

The meeting agreed that more stakeholder consultation was required to consult more widely on matters relating to GMOs. The Ministry of Higher Education was asked to spearhead these deliberations with all the concerned stakeholders.

And Mr Tonga said "Opposed to the reports and concerns, currently the Biotechnology and Biosafety Policy is in the hands of the Ministry of Higher Education and they would conduct public consultation at the appropriate time. "

At the same meeting, the National Biosafety Authority Board Chairperson, Dr Paul Zambezi, also stated that the Authority has a competent Scientific Advisory Committee which reviews the applications and conducts risks assessments before any application is approved or rejected. Risk assessment is a process which takes between 120 to 150 days. Permits to either import or place on the market are only issued after the products are found to be safe.

"As National Biosafety Authority we are concerned about human health, animal health and the environment and issues concerning GMOs are taken seriously. Therefore, we are concerned with the statements being issued by some sections of society spreading falsehoods that NBA has gone against the policy stance of no GMOs when in fact we are trying to make the public aware of what products are on the market for them to make an informed choice as they shop."

Prior to the risk assessment there is public consultation and our concern is that very few people come forth to comment on the applications. We have been calling on people with scientific evidence to prove that whatever activity an entity would apply for would not be harmful or is safe for use by the general public.

“As regulators we do not promote or hinder GMOs, our job is to regulate and provide information based on scientific evidence on gene technology therefore help people make informed decisions. The people have the right to choose either to consume products of genetic modification or not. That is why our law clearly states that all products of genetic modification must be labelled. Our aim is to ensure we educate the public and enable consumers to have the right to choose what they want to consume as long as it is safe for the humans, animals and the environment,” Mr Tonga explained.

"We have also observed that at the moment the general public is not very aware about the Biosafety Act. The NBA is operationalizing the Act to correct the situation and ensuring that the public is sensitized. It is important to state that products of genetically modified organisms were already coming in the country before the establishment of the NBA and no risk assessment was being conducted to ascertain the safety of such products. Therefore, the public should embrace the functions of the NBA as it is regulating and testing the products to ensure safety. “

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