

Without GMOs, South African maize yields would be lower -industry group

May 3 South Africa's maize crop, scorched this season by a blistering drought, would be in far worse shape if it were not for the country's embrace of genetically-modified (GMO) varieties and new farm technologies, an industry group said on Tuesday.

South Africa's Agricultural Biotechnology Industry (ABI) said during the last serious drought in 1991/92, before Africa's biggest maize producer adopted GM crops, the average maize yield was 0.85/tonnes per hectare.

"The 2014/15 and 2015/16 seasons have both been drought years. With the adoption of GM maize the average yield today is estimated at 3.72/tonnes per hectare," it said in a statement.

ABI said without GM varieties and new technologies, South Africa would likely have only produced 1.65 million tonnes of maize this season, and would have needed to import an additional 9.4 million tonnes at an estimated additional cost of 33 billion rand (\$2.30 billion).

Grain SA, a producer organisation, estimates South Africa will need to import 3.8 million tonnes of maize this marketing year, which began on May 1, because of drought-induced shortages which have pushed up domestic food prices and inflation.

South Africa is normally a net exporter of maize and seldom needs to import to meet its domestic needs.

Up until April 22, South Africa in the last marketing season (May-April) had imported about 1.8 million tonnes of maize, according to data compiled by the South African Grain Information Service (SAGIS).

ABI chairman Andrew Bennett said in a presentation that new methods, such as precision farming which uses GPS technology to improve efficiencies, had also contributed to better yields.

ABI also said South Africa will launch a biotech drought tolerant maize, using a gene donated royalty free from Monsanto, for the first time in 2017. It has been tested by smallholder farmers ahead of its roll out and has been approved for use in South Africa.

(\$1 = 14.3594 rand) (Reporting by Ed Stoddard; Editing by James Macharia)

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