

NEWS RELEASE

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Scientists Form Initiative to Manage Intellectual Property in Ag Biotech

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To fight world hunger and promote domestic economic development, North Carolina State University Chancellor Marye Anne Fox and leaders of a number of public-sector agricultural research institutions across the United States have pledged to share access to agricultural technologies in an attempt to unshackle the restraints currently handcuffing efforts to commercialize new crops spurred by advances in agricultural biotechnology.

The formation of the new initiative – the Public-Sector Intellectual Property Resource for Agriculture (PIPRA) – is announced in a Policy Forum paper in the July 11 edition of *Science*.

PIPRA aims to review public-sector patenting and licensing practices to ensure that public-sector research institutions continue to hold intellectual property rights to their technologies; form a collective public intellectual property asset database that would share information about public-sector patents and licensing status; and explore the sharing of specific public-sector technologies into packages that would be available to member institutions and to the private sector for commercial licensing.

Changes in the ways intellectual property rights are granted, changes in the ways public institutions manage intellectual property and the development of a research-intensive agricultural private sector have all placed constraints on the ability of public-sector institutions to get new crops into the marketplace, the paper states.

In fact, while many discoveries and technologies in agriculture have been generated with public funds – almost 25 percent of agricultural biotechnology patents derive from the public sector – these discoveries and technologies are not necessarily easily accessible as “public goods,” the paper asserts.

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“Agricultural research in the public sector is focused on benefiting the global community and promoting economic development, but it’s becoming increasingly difficult to get new staple and specialty crops into the marketplace,” says Fox. “This initiative, which is open to any public research institution, is an important step toward speeding up research, development and commercialization of the staple crops that feed the world and the specialty crops that spur economic revival in states across the country.”

Public-sector research institutions provide service to the citizens of their states by developing new staple crops for humanitarian purposes – foods like rice and bananas, for example – and new specialty crops grown regionally to boost local economic development.

The rise of biotechnology in agriculture has fueled this service, leading to the creation of faster-growing, disease-resistant crops and brand new hybrid crops that provide the best qualities of their progenitors, for example.

But the *Science* paper points out that ownership of intellectual property has become so fragmented that it’s hard to sort out who owns what.

Dr. Steve Lommel, assistant vice chancellor for research and professor of plant pathology at NC State, says that NC State scientists have created varieties of crops like tobacco, peanut, tomato, sweet potato and melon that are supported by commodity groups but unable to be released to the public because the crops were created using technologies owned by private industry.

PIPRA’s founders believe that if public-sector institutions work together to both retain certain rights to their agricultural technologies when licensing them to companies and catalog the intellectual property rights, the development and commercialization of staple and specialty crops would be accelerated.