



SNAPSHOT Rare beef

Africa's impressively horned Ankole cows are one of many threatened indigenous livestock breeds. A survey of cattle, pigs, goats, sheep and poultry in 169 countries found that native breeds are being supplanted by high-yielding commercial strains, which may

not be as resistant to disease and drought.

"Valuable breeds are disappearing at an alarming rate," says survey leader Carlos Seré, director-general of the International Livestock Research Institute in Nairobi. At a meeting this week of policymakers, breeders and livestock scientists, he called for the creation of gene banks to conserve sperm and eggs

from rare breeds.

The survey adds to fears that damaging levels of inbreeding exist even among the most abundant commercial breeds. For example, the world's most widespread cattle breed, Holstein-Friesian, is thought to be almost exclusively descended from just a few dozen prized individuals owned by breeding companies. ■

Michael Hopkin

Biotech crop rules get rewrite

A process aimed at revising the regulation of genetically modified organisms (GMOs) has been launched by the US Department of Agriculture (USDA). But critics fear the changes will not go far enough to protect the environment and public health.

The USDA is one of three US agencies responsible for regulating GMOs, along with the Food and Drug Administration and the Environmental Protection Agency. A draft environmental-impact statement released in July gives the first glimpses of how the USDA rules might change. It proposes to expand its authority from plants that might endanger other plants to "the full range of potential agricultural and environmental risks posed by these organisms, including risks to public health".

The agency is also suggesting a tiered programme, with different regulations for different levels of risk, and special rules for

organisms that produce compounds used in industry or pharmaceutical products. Other proposals include allowing regulation of a crop that has previously been officially "deregulated" and creating a new category for permitted "low level presence" of GMOs in food and seed crops.

Karen Perry Stillerman, a senior analyst for the Union of Concerned Scientists, is underwhelmed. "We would like to see a ban on growing pharmaceutical and industrial compounds in food crops outdoors," she says.

"This is the kind of feedback we are trying to get," says USDA spokeswoman Rachel Iadicco. Public comment will be collected until 11 September; then the USDA will probably write a proposed rule that would have its own public comment period. Only then will the final rule be published. "It is a lengthy process," says Iadicco. ■

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