

The LOTASSA proposal: the success of enthusiasm and tenacity.

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LOTASSA (**LOT**us **A**daptation and **S**ustainability in **S**outh-**A**merica) is the acronym of a project entitled “Bridging Genomics and Agrosystem Management: Resources for Adaptation and Sustainable Production of forage *Lotus* species in Environmentally Constrained South-American Soils”, which has been recently selected for funding by the EU International Cooperation (INCO) Program. The global objective of LOTASSA is to develop superior biological and genetic resources to 1) assist and speed up selection of *Lotus* genotypes more tolerant to abiotic stresses and 2) to improve productivity, sustainability and quality of *Lotus* pastures in environmentally constrained areas of South America. For this, LOTASSA will exploit the close genetic relatedness between the model *L. japonicus* and cultivated *Lotus* spp. In this respect, LOTASSA represents a pioneer project where basic and applied plant research are combined for a common goal.

The project is participated by 16 groups belonging to 14 different institutions from 8 countries: Argentina (Oscar Ruiz, IIB-INTECh; Roberto Racca, IFFIVE-INTA), Brazil (Miguel Dall’Agnol and Enilson Saccol de Sá, both from UFRGS), Chile (Hernán Acuña, INIA), Uruguay (Jorge Monza, UDELAR; Carlos Labandera, MGAP; Mónica Rebuffo, INIA), Regional Organization (Emilio Ruz, PROCISUR), Denmark (Jens Stougaard, UAAR), Germany (Michael Udvardi, MPI-GOLM; Martin Parniske, LMU), Slovakia (Igor Mistrik, BU-SAV) and Spain (Antonio Marquez, USEV; Manuel Becana and Juan Sanjuán, both from CSIC), which will share the almost 2 million Euro budget granted by the EU Commission to this project. All partners congratulate for this success that will allow an important international effort directed towards the understanding of *Lotus* spp. responses to abiotic stresses and the development of resources to improve their adaptation to environmentally-constrained soils in South America. All partners are really excited and expectant about the opportunities that LOTASSA offers to them. Once the proposal has been granted and before the official launching of the project, expected by the end of 2005, it is time to recollect memories that may help to understand that this final success was preceded by lots of difficulties that were overcome by the tenacity and enthusiasm of all people involved.

In fact, the roots of LOTASSA can be tracked back a few years ago, in July 2000, when O. Ruiz and J. Sanjuán, together with M. Udvardi and C. Labandera initiated the preparation of a modest proposal with the acronym **LOTAUS** (**LOT**us **A**daptation and sustainability in **A**rgentinian and **U**ruguayan **S**oils), which could not be finally submitted due to bureaucracy obstacles. The idea of a proposal was kept frozen until 2003, when the thematic priorities of a new INCO call would provide the possibility for a new submission. Between 2000 and

2003, workshops organized by O. Ruiz in Chascomús (Argentina) on the ecophysiology of *Lotus* and its symbionts were extremely important in keeping our interest for the topic and especially to facilitate that some of the future LOTASSA partners met for the first time (Ruiz, 2004). It was by the middle of 2003 when additional partners were invited to participate, including J. Stougaard, M. Dall'Agno, E. Saccol de Sá, H. Acuña, M. Rebuffo, etc., which obviously implied much more complexity for the future proposal. At the same time, another consortium interested in a rather similar topic was building up, headed by A. Márquez (Sevilla, Spain). It was a lucky coincidence that some researchers had been invited to participate in both consortia. Aware of this, O. Ruiz, J. Sanjuán and A. Márquez met in Sevilla, under the heat of July, to evaluate the overlap between the two consortia, concluding that it would be very easy to combine both consortia into a single proposal that would be stronger than the individual ones and would thus avoid unnecessary competition for funding. It was also agreed that J. Sanjuán, who had been the coordinator of the initial LOTAUS, would be the coordinator of the joint consortia and proposal that would end up as LOTASSA. Unfortunately, the proposal, with 13 participants at that time, could not be submitted that year, due to some loose sections that still required further work and time, and to personal problems of the coordinator in the dates previous to the deadline, early September 2003. However, the preparation of the proposal had reached a very advanced state by then and it was decided to submit it to the next INCO call in 2004. At this point, the enthusiastic effort of a partner, M. Rebuffo must be recognized. Not only she was an invaluable support to the coordinator during the proposal preparation in 2003 (and beyond), she also convinced PROCISUR to provide funds to organize a meeting in INIA-La Estanzuela (Colonia, Uruguay) among most South American LOTASSA partners and the project coordinator in March 2004. This meeting was particularly important to evaluate the weaknesses of the 2003 draft, including the needs for additional partners, in order to strengthen the proposal. It was then that PROCISUR, represented by E. Ruz, decided to join the consortium, something that was of great importance to the final success of the proposal. Other partners that joined the consortium after this meeting were M. Becana (Spain) and R. Racca (Argentina).

With all this background, the stage was set up for a strong proposal that was at last submitted in September 2004 and was indeed selected after a tough evaluation, as only 20 proposals were selected for funding among a total of 138 submissions. Lots of bureaucratic steps have been solved after then, and yet a few more formularies will need to be compiled before actual starting of the project this year 2005. We are confident that once we put hands on the bench, the enthusiasm of the partners will make of this international experience a great advance in the genetics, physiology and microbiology of *Lotus*, towards more productive and sustainable pastures to feed up animal livestock in the Southern Cone.

On behalf of all partners, we invite *Lotus* researchers to keep updated on the progress of this project, through the *Lotus Newsletter* and the LOTASSA web page that will be accessible after project launching.

References

- RUIZ O.A. 2004. Interdisciplinary workshop on genetic, molecular and ecophysiological aspects of *Lotus* spp. and their symbionts. *Lotus Newsletter*, **34**, 60-65.