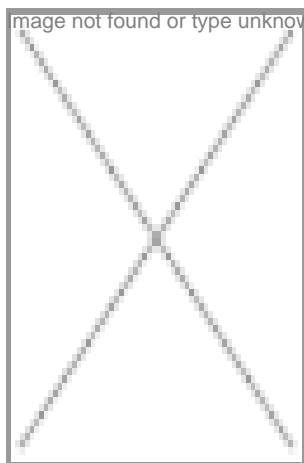


Bt Maize trials shown red signal

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The stopping of of Bt Maize trials in Bihar by the Environment Ministry has raised several grave questions. The absence of a clear policy regarding the commercial utilization of the outcome of huge investments into R&D of various crops, is seen as a major hindrance to the agri-biotech sector



Bt crops has once again found itself amidst controversies in India. Mr Jairam Ramesh, the minister for forest & environment, had during March, directed the Genetic Engineering Appraisal Committee (GEAC) to immediately cancel field trials for Bt maize in Bihar. Maize is India's 3rd largest cereal crop. Mr Ramesh intervened after Bihar chief minister Nitish Kumar put his strong objections on the trials before the Environment Ministry. In a letter written to the GEAC, Mr Ramesh also instructed the GEAC to give state governments a month's time to agree or disagree with the field

The ministry's decision to overlook the GEAC has also raised questions on the powers of the regulatory body. Earlier the GEAC, which is under the ministry of environment and forests, had given a go-ahead to a giant, Monsanto, to conduct field trials of Bt maize.

However, the voices coming from the agri-biotech industry are very clear this time. The industry has come up with a clear mandate and allow Bt crops in India.

The Indian Maize Development Association (IMDA) expressed its apprehensions over the decision. Dr Sain Dass, president, IMDA said, "With the success maize has achieved over the years and with the potential the crop has to offer, there is

significant scope to repeat the Bt cotton story with maize and put India on the world Bt map.”

The Association of Biotechnology Led Enterprises-Agriculture Group (ABLE-AG) while labeling the development as unfortunate, observed that the industry will continue to engage in constructive dialogue with several regulatory authorities, including GEAC, Department of Biotechnology, State Agriculture Universities and farmers amongst others to develop technologies and products in India that are important and relevant to the country's agriculture needs. “We are confident that our country's science-based regulatory system will continue to support research-led innovations in agriculture and will help improve crop productivity, thereby benefitting Indian farmers, consumers, environment and our nation as a whole,” said VR Kaundinya, Chairman, ABLE-AG.

The safety of Bt maize has been established through detailed tests and studies. So what seems to be the problem with Bt maize in Indian? Industry experts are baffled at the fact that decisions surrounding Bt maize are being taken due to political interference and not based on scientific reasoning.

Many independent bio-agri consultants like Dr TM Manjunath believe that regulatory committees comprise eminent scientists who use their collective knowledge and wisdom in taking a decision on such issues based on science. “Our politicians are best advised to be guided by the eminent scientific bodies on such issues and not misled by self-styled environmentalists.” says Dr Manjunath, who is a consultant at Agri-Biotechnology & Integrated Pest Management.

Raising far more serious questions, Dr KK Narayanan, managing director, Metahelix, asks, “How can we afford not to have the latest technologies in this crop? The sudden halting of the trials instills further uncertainty in the road towards commercializing of not just Bt maize, but all other crops as well. Unless there is a clearly laid out path towards commercial utilization of the outcome of such investments, all investments will amount to a mere waste of the nation's resources and scientific talent.”

However Dr B Mazumdar, vice-President, Bejo Sheetal Seeds takes this as an isolated case. Dr Mazumdar says, “This is a special case and we feel that this is not generalized directive for all the GM trials.”

The increased productivity in maize can turn India into a dominant exporter of maize particularly in Asia due to low cost of production and advantages in transportation. Therefore, it is high time for the Indian government to clear the air on Bt crops because it cannot continue to overlook the aspirations of the Indian agri-biotech industry.

Rahul Koul in New Delhi