

Bt cotton gets green signal in North India

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The March 4 meeting of the apex regulatory body, the Genetic Engineering Approval Committee (GEAC), saw the approval of six new varieties of transgenic cotton in the northern states of Punjab, Haryana and Rajasthan. This landmark decision of GEAC has paved way for commercial cultivation of transgenic cotton in these states for the first time.

These approved genetically modified Bt cotton hybrids, engineered to provide resistance against the American bollworm, are MRC-6301 and MRC-6304 of the Jalna-based Maharashtra Hybrid Seeds Company (Mahyco), RCH-134 and RCH-138 of the Coimbatore-based Rasi Seeds and Ankur-651 and Ankur-2534 of the Nagpur-based Ankur Seeds.

With this, the total tally of Bt cotton hybrids approved for cultivation has climbed up to ten. The first approval was granted in 2002 to three Bt cotton hybrids of Mahyco (Mech-162, Mech-184 and Mech-12) and last year, RCH-2, the Bt cotton variety of Rasi Seeds was given the green signal for cultivation in Central and Southern India.



The GEAC's decision has led to a wide range of reactions ranging from outright disapproval from some of the NGOs to wholehearted support from the industry organizations. Says Bhagirath Choudhary, national coordinator of International Service for Acquisition of Agri-biotech Applications (ISAAA): "It is a great news for the farmers in the northern part of India which consists of five major states. You might remember that northern states like Punjab, Haryana and UP are the food baskets of India. The first Green Revolution was ushered in India through the fields of these three states. We are happy that the GEAC has approved six hybrids in these states where farmers would benefit the most. These hybrids would provide a 'Combi' offer against Boll Worm (Bt in hybrid) and Chlor Leaf Virus (best available hybrids against CLV) in the northern parts". D. Suman, Saha, convenor, Gene Campaign, countered: "It is absurd that before there is any review of the reported bad performance of the Monsanto cotton, and large scale defiance of the refuge management requirement, the GEAC has gone ahead and approved new varieties for Punjab, Haryana and Rajasthan. There seems to be neither will nor capacity in the GEAC to control the serious problem of illegal Bt varieties; their only interest seems to be in releasing new GM crops. One must seriously question this."

• The renewal of the Bt cotton varieties being planted in the southern parts of the country has been deferred to the next GEAC meeting to be held in April 19.

At present it is estimated that about 30-35 percent of the cotton growing area in the northern zones is under illegal (or spurious) cotton cultivation. It is believed that the GEAC had received specific requests for the quick approval of Bt cotton from the Punjab and Haryana state government as the farmers were being lured by the illegal cotton varieties. After long deliberations on the pros and cons of the technology, these varieties were cleared. Now the approval is expected to curb the illegal rampant sale and reduce the intensification of the cultivation of rice and wheat in the northern region.

• This is believed to be because of allegations from the NGO GreenPeace regarding discrepancies in data. Some discrepancies were noted in the data from Warangal district of Andhra Pradesh, and the GEAC has asked the state government to submit a report.

The companies concerned are upbeat about the committee's decision and their mood is reflected in MG Ramasami, managing director, Rasi Seeds. "We welcome this move and we are getting ready to place RCH 134 and RCH 138 variety seeds in the market by the first week of April. At present the demand for hybrid Bt cottonseeds is very high and I am not sure if we will be able to meet the requirements. Now the farmers will have access to legal varieties. The merits of our hybrid seeds have been demonstrated last year but I am doubtful if we are equipped to cope up with the huge demand arising from the northern region," Ramasami said.

• Large-scale trials of six varieties of Bt cotton have been permitted in North India. The permitted varieties for trials include two varieties each from Mahyco, Rasi Seeds, and Nuziveedu Seeds.

Overall, the industry believes that this is a positive step. As RK Sinha, executive director, All India Crop Biotechnology Association points out, "The crux of the matter is what the farmer needs. Till now in the northern region the farmers were just not bothered about the legal status of the cotton seeds. They were going ahead and planting whatever seeds they could source - illegal or spurious varieties. So it is a good decision to provide them the legal seed, which brings them the support infrastructure of the companies." The fate of Bt cotton now will be determined by how these varieties will perform when they go to the fields. n

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