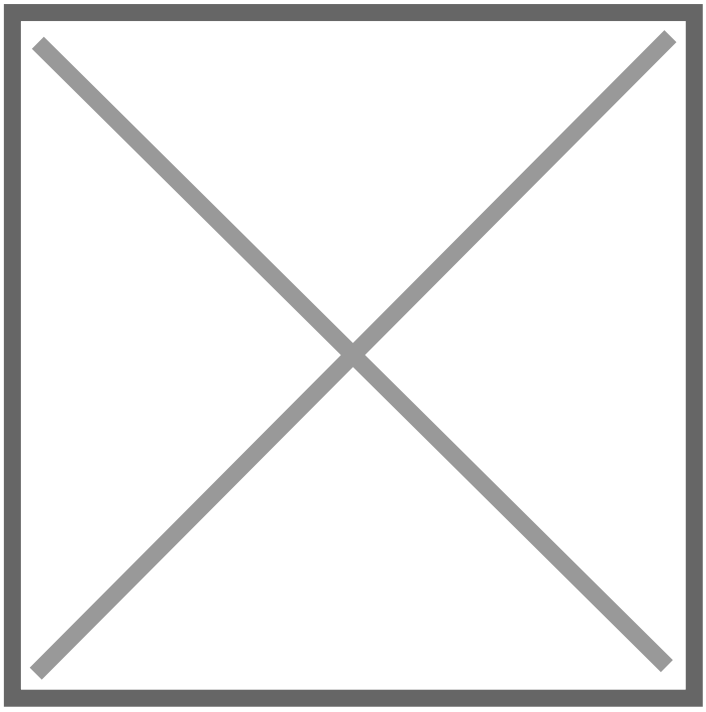
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"Krishidhan is one of the first three companies to launch Bollgard-II"

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Madhav Dhande, director-operations, Krishidhan Seeds Ltd

Madhav Dhande has been associated with the agricultural sector for over three decades and is renowned for his analysis of operation planning and forecasting. He has been propelling Krishidhan's growth as a director- operations since the last five years.

When did you launch Bt cottonseeds in India?
And why and when did you enter the Bt cotton area?

We launched Bt cotton in India during 2006. We decided to enter into GM crops in 2001 though the approval and regulatory procedure took a bit longer to launch the products. We entered the Bt cotton segment because of the continuous outbreak of bollworm complex, indiscriminate use of pesticides and drop in productivity, quality and profitability to a farmer.

What were the challenges you faced during the launch of the Bt cottonseeds in India?

Although we faced difficulty in conducting the trials on a very large number of farmers' fields as required by the regulatory process, the real bottleneck was when ICAR and SAU accepted only one genotype at a time. Delaying approvals to our other promising genotypes suited for different micro niches.

What is your current reach and how has the sales been?

During the first year of launch, we could sell Bt cotton only in the central zone and southern zone and we sold almost 1.5 lakh packets of Bt cotton. Based on the performance of our products in farmers' fields and enthusiasm, we anticipate a significant market share of 13-15 percent.

Which technology do you use? Are you looking at other technologies?

At present we are using Monsanto technology. Krishidhan is one of the first three companies to launch Bollgard-II, which is more effective than Bollgard-I and while we continue to use Monsanto technology, we are in the process of looking at other

technologies that would let us control bollworms complex and other pests. We are also looking for virus, herbicide and drought resistant gene technology.

What were the initiatives you took to promote Bt cottonseeds amongst the farming community across the country during the initial period of launch?

Since the day one, i.e., before launch and during launch, we promoted Bt cotton technology as an "insurance" against Bollworm complex and introduced the concept of "Isase behtar kuch nahi". We highlighted the USP of BG-II as a "superior form of technology, superior protection, and maximum yield and profitability". We used this message to create awareness. In addition to this, we delivered and arranged more than 300 seminars on Bt cotton particularly in the central and south zones to educate farmers on a large scale. We also took initiatives in educating the farmers for Bt cultivation. Organizing such knowledge exchange programs has made Krishidhan's Bt cotton products as the most favorable and preferred choice of cotton for farmers in both the zones.

What are the current promotional activities? Have farmers accepted Bt cotton? And what are the challenges now?

The current set of promotional activities of Krishidhan is mainly focused on "BG-II technology with desired tolerance to sucking pest complex in our elite hybrid" and certainly the method of cultivation. Most of the farmers have happily accepted our Bt hybrids that promise good productivity and quality and our scientific teams and research center is continuously working towards further improvement and advancement of the available technology.

Most of the big challenges faced by the industry in reaching Bt cotton to farmers in rural areas are partial control of different state governments on several issues like fixing realistic prices, packaging, and label claims, that too during the peak of the season. The other challenge is to deal with small players who respond to a cut-throat competition by resorting to illegal or sub-standard products.

Is there a conflict of interest between the state governments and the seed companies?

In our perception, it is not a fight between corporate and the state government where the primary aim of both the industry and the government is to protect the interest of the farmer. The industry's view is that if prices are made unprofitable, it will bounce back on farmers as he is involved in both seed and commercial production. If the industry fails to have organized seed production, the farmers will not get remunerative prices and lack of quality seeds will affect the income of farmers growing commercial crop.

One has to understand that the higher prices of seeds are due to great value addition done by companies through the development of technology traits and improved germplasm. If companies do not get any incremental price for their superior germplasm, it will be a serious setback for R&D in private sectors. Hence, one expects government bodies to act with reason and restraint.

How do you see the future for Bt cottonseeds in India and other Bt food and feed crops?

The prospects of Bt cottonseed with value addition such as BG-II technology with herbicide resistance gene seem to be very promising. The prospect for Bt food also appears to be very good. We feel bringing insect resistance in other crops such as brinjal, redgram, cabbage, tomato and cauliflower will relatively decrease the amount of insecticides used which would lead to better human health and environment.

With more companies entering the Bt cotton space, do you foresee a price war?

Not really, more the merrier as the technology will be able to penetrate to all cotton farmers in different agri-eco zones. The company will win on quality but not on price, since the farmer has become discriminating and prefers to plant quality product even if the prices are higher.

What are the reasons for the mixed reactions on the Bt cottonseeds in India?

Though Bt cotton was launched about five years back, it has been surrounded by controversies. In a democratic country like India, nobody can be prevented from expressing their opinion. However, the reality is that Bt improves the environment and it has already reduced the pesticide consumption and also improved the income of farmers. The boogie of farmers' suicides or environmental detoriation due to Bt cotton looks more like a misinformation campaign.

Which are the other GM crops areas that you contemplate to enter?

We would like to extend our research on oil seeds, pulses and several vegetables. Our long-term goals are to reach out to poor farmers' needs and rain-fed conditions that includes maize, sorghum, bajra, pulses and many more.

What is the status of your R&D for the GM crops?

We have consciously decided to spend minimum 12 percent or more of our turnover in R&D covering both basic and applied research in agribiotech. We are in the process of establishing "state-of-the-art" biotechnology laboratories in Special Economic Zones (SEZs).

Do you feel the government should allow more GM crops in India?

Countries that have not compromised with the bio-safety but when convinced that a gene is bio-safe and have not hesitated in deregulating are the ones that have created maximum wealth in the agriculture sector.