

Creating awareness to curb sale of fake Bt seeds

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Year after year there has been an increase in the sale of Bt cotton seeds but at the same time one can also see proliferation of spurious Bt seeds in the country. This is mainly due to lack of awareness on the advantages of legal Bt cottonseeds and strict monitoring by the implementing agencies.

Since the commercialization of the first GM crop i.e. Bt cotton in April 2002, several efforts have been made by various government agencies as well as industry bodies to spread education and awareness among the stakeholders associated with genetically modified (GM) crops.

In February 2006, the All India Crop Biotechnology Association (AICBA) organized a workshop in Ahmedabad on technical and legal issues related to transgenic/GM crops in India for the district agriculture officials from Gujarat.

The workshop assumes significance in view of the large-scale spread of unapproved Bt cotton cultivation across cotton-growing states. AICBA believes that education and awareness amongst agricultural officials, traders, dealers, industry associations and growers is the need of the hour and plans to hold similar programs in other cotton growing states.

Increase in sale of Bt cotton

In the last four years, the number of Bt cotton hybrids has increased from three (with only one company – Mahyco

Monsanto Biotech India in 2002) to 20 hybrids in 2005 with four companies selling Bt cotton seeds in nine states except the eastern zone of the country. In 2005, India had by far the largest year-on-year proportional increase, with an almost three-fold increase, from five lakh hectares in 2004 to 13 lakh hectares, exclusively in just one GM crop-cotton. Bt cotton. This has brought down the sale of non-Bt cotton seeds from 15 lakh packets last year to five lakh.

In the last cropping season, Bt cottonseeds were sold to the farmers at Rs 1,850 for a 450-gm pack, of which a major share of Rs 1,250 was paid as royalty to Mahyco Monsanto Biotech (India) Ltd (MMB), a 50:50 marketing joint venture between Mahyco and Monsanto Holdings Private Limited for transfer of the 'trait value' into the seed. The NGOs representing the farmers group alleged that the technology developer, Monsanto was collecting higher royalty from Indian farmers by collecting Rs 1,200 as against Rs 34 in China and Rs 108 in America as royalties for its patent rights. The high cost of Bt-cotton seeds, which promises protection from the bollworm menace, has led to proliferation of spurious seeds resulting in crop failures and distress to some farmers leading to even suicide.

Sale of illegal Bt cottonseeds

According to Afsar H Jafri of Research Foundation for Science, Technology and Ecology (RFSTE), the sale of illegal Bt cottonseeds is a matter of grave concern. Proliferation of these illegal varieties include Azadi, Anmol, Best, Maha Anmol, Sudarshan, Aiklav, Bahadur, Gold, Maha Gujarat, Sema, Sartaj, Kamander, Balwan, Mold, Om-1, 2 & 3, Rakshak, Patidar-8, Navbharat 55, 151, & 11, Parth, Sarthi, Paramarsh 10, Surakksha, Anand-41, Jai Ratan, Navratan, Varsha, A1- Homeguard, Bullet-707, Manmold and Sona.

A study conducted by another NGO, Gene Campaign has showed that illegal Bt cotton varieties like Bunny Bt, Super Bunny, H-8 and Om-3 were sown in 2004 season.

The illegal sale of unapproved Bt cotton has spread to Punjab, Haryana and Rajasthan. There is a big market of spurious and illegal Bt cotton seeds in these states as it is made available at a relatively low price to farmers by those engaged in this business. According to reports, agents in Punjab and Haryana procure the illegal and spurious seed at a rate varying between Rs 250 and Rs 500 per packet weighing 450 gram and they further sell it for Rs 900 per packet, which is much lower than the market price of the legal Bt cotton seeds.

Coming under heavy pressure from the governments, MMB has finally reduced the technology fee charged to seed companies for use of its insect-protected cotton technology in order to best meet current market conditions. In the coming season, the technology fee would be Rs 900 per 450 gm packet of Bollgard cotton seed, approximately 30 percent less than last year's technology fee of Rs 1,250 per packet. "This change in the technology fee will give MMB's seed company licensees an opportunity to pass along new savings to farmers if they choose. If seed companies do choose to lower their final seed prices, we believe that this will encourage more farmers to choose genuine Bollgard technology, because of its clear benefits," said Sarita Bahl, senior manager – public affairs, Monsanto Holdings Private Limited. This will support the seed companies to offer the legal Bt cottonseeds to the farmers at an affordable price.

Government initiatives

In addition to the industry's initiatives the state governments have been advised to constitute special flying squads to check the sale of illegal Bt cotton seeds and undertake massive campaigns to educate farmers on the subject. The Union Ministry of Agriculture ministry, on being aware of the illegal sale of unapproved Bt cotton seeds, has directed the state governments concerned to strictly enforce the provisions of Seeds Control Order 1983, to deal with the situation. The environment ministry has constituted a committee to institute a monitoring verification mechanism to assess the performance of approved Bt cotton seeds.

The Union Ministry of Agriculture recently convened a meeting to discuss various issues related to Bt cotton. It has requested the state governments to deal strictly with elements engaged in the sale of spurious and illegal Bt cotton seeds. Even states like Punjab, Haryana and Maharashtra have joined hands to stop the sale of illegal Bt cotton seeds as also the sale of spurious Bt cotton seeds from Gujarat.

But the agriculture officials are caught up because of lack of a forceful legislation. According to the provisions of the Seeds Act, no action can be taken if the seeds are sold loose (without being packed and sealed). The sale of unpacked seeds does not attract penal action, thus paving the way for irregularities. Though the state governments have been taking several measures to check illegal sale of Bt cotton seeds, the seeds have been reaching farmers either through traders or farmers retaining the seeds of the previous year.

Dr RA Sherasia, director of Agriculture Department, Government of Gujarat, said, "Our department is committed to educating

the farmers to ensure that the farmers purchase Bt cotton seeds from recognized sources only. We also aim to provide the agronomical know-how regarding cultivation of Bt cotton and critical points to look after it through mass media and preventing sale of F2, unauthorized and other spurious seeds that are currently being sold under the guise of genuine Bt seeds."

Along with strict monitoring and implementation of the laws of the land, the government should also look into the other issues like giving approvals to newer varieties so that the farmers sow only the approved varieties.

Throwing light on the legal framework applicable to transgenic crops in India, Kirit Javali of Jafa & Javali Advocates said, "There is a misconception and confusion prevailing that action can be brought only under the Seeds Act, 1966. However, the 1989 Rules under the Environment (Protection) Act (EPA), 1986, it is specifically provided that no products containing genetically modified micro-organisms in relation to Bt cotton can be sold without the mandatory approval of GEAC and further that penalty provisions are stipulated under Section 15 of the EPA where action can be initiated."

He further said, "The Government of India has brought out the new Seeds Bill, 2004 through the Agricultural Ministry and is trying to remove the distinction between notified and other varieties. All types of seeds must now be registered under the proposed Seeds Bill, 2004. The Bill is presently before the Standing Committee of Parliament on Agriculture for consideration."

Keeping in mind the significance in view of the large scale spread of unapproved Bt cotton cultivation across cotton growing states, AICBA felt it became necessary to educate and create awareness amongst the agricultural inspectors, traders, dealers, and industry on the prevailing laws. AICBA plans to hold similar programs in other cotton growing states to curb the menace of illegal Bt cotton. This will go along way is helping the industry to grow by offering quality seeds to the farming community at an affordable price.

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