

ABLE-AG petitions MoEF, GEAC to allow R&D field trials of biotech-enhanced seeds

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Allow R&D field trials of biotech enhanced seeds, ABLE-AG petitions MoEF, GEAC



The reconstitution of Genetic Engineering Appraisal Committee (GEAC) had led many to believe that the regulatory body would be aggressively taking up the 50 applications for research field trials, pending over a year's time. However, the woes of agri-biotech industry seem to be far from over as there has been no decision yet taken due to absence of few members in the first meeting held on the March 22, 2013 (as per sources). Moreover, the subsequent meeting scheduled for the April was also cancelled without any clear reasons.

Therefore, pressed into a difficult situation owing to zero progress since the last 12 months, the the Association of Biotech Led Enterprises - Agriculture Group (ABLE-AG), has expressed apprehensions over the fate of R&D on biotechnology-enhanced seeds, which present potentially vital inputs to enabling food security of the country and farmer prosperity. The industry body that represents major agri-biotech coompanies, has now sought urgent action from the Minister of Environment and Forests (MoEF), Ms Jayanthi Natarajan, and the GEAC to permit research field trials of biotechnology-enhanced seeds in the Kharif season sowing underway for continued R&D efforts by private and public sector institutions.

Commenting on the issue, Mr Ram Kaundinya, chairman, ABLE-AG, stated, "It is time to yield to the potential and entrepreneurial spirit of our nations 130 million farmers, science in agriculture talent, and rich diverse natural resources for domestic food, feed, fibre self-sufficiency, farmer prosperity, and to increase India's contribution to helping meets the needs of people in other continents and countries like Africa and China. Farmers choosing biotechnology-enhanced seeds have harvested this potential for the nation in cotton. It is time to yield to the potential of farmers, and technology."

"Seed biotechnologies offer benefits for insect protection, weed management, yield enhancement, drought and flood tolerance, nutrition enhancement, healthier oils and more," added Mr Kaundinya who is also the CEO of UPL Advanta Seeds.

GEAC, as the apex body in charge of granting field trials permissions for biotechnology-enhanced seeds crops had not met

even once between April 2012 and February 2013. This severely affected R&D on biotechnology-enhanced Seeds and has thrown the industry into a tizzy because of the uncertain policy environment due to inaction in the Ministry of Environment and Forests.

Dr N Seetharama, executive director, ABLE-AG in letter to MoEF additional secretary Mr Hem Pande, who is also the chairman, GEAC, wrote that the intervening period between the expiry of the term of previous GEAC in April 2012, and the reconstitution of new committee in March 2013 created an unusually long gap; this has resulted in complete halt in conduct of research field trials with biotechnology-enhanced seeds by Indian and international companies, as well as the Indian public sector research institutions.

"Let us remember the farmer feeds and clothes our nation. In 2012 field testing of many products had reached a crucial stage in the development, and therefore this delay has created a serious impediment for further progress in product development by most of our member companies. Therefore at least now in Kharif 2013, we need to ensure that field trials are sown in time at the approved sites so that the required biosafety and efficacy data are made available to GEAC to make informed decisions on the safety, efficacy and desirability of these new technologies in the future."

He also pointed out that between the 116th and the 117th GEAC meetings, review of more than 50 applications have been pending. "These applications are for different biotechnology-enhanced seeds and traits from public and private sectors, and the outcome has a significant bearing on Indian agriculture, and particularly to the welfare of the farming community," the letter said.

Dr Seetharama went on to add that, with the delay in obtaining approvals, the opportunity for planting during 2013 Kharif (from April 15 - July 31, 2013 from North through South India) is now under severe threat of the entire year being lost due to inaction. If immediate action is not taken, it will result in losing yet one more year as the required field trial data cannot be generated without timely planted research field trials. In fact, farmers have already started sowing crops in the irrigated Northern belt (the optimal sowing window in North ends around May 10th each year), and progresses across the country towards the onset of the monsoon. Researchers need to match the planting seasonal window, thus he appealed to the MoEF to give the required approvals immediately.