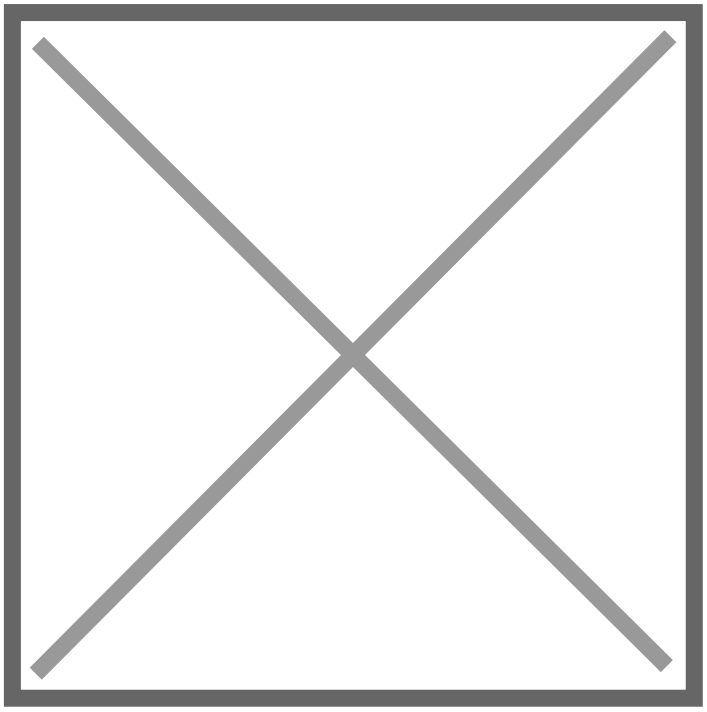
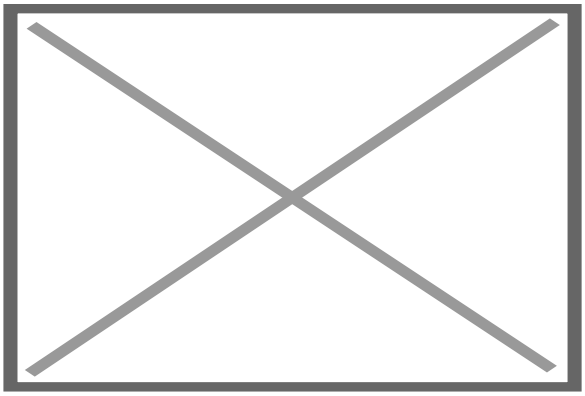
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State NOC requirement halts Bt crop field trials

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The recent resolution by the GEAC to seek state government's no objection to allow biotech firms to conduct field trials for Bt crops has affected around 100 field trials



The genetic engineering approval committee (GEAC), which is the apex body in the country to approve field trials for all genetically modified varieties of crops, introduced a new rule that bioagri companies must obtain a no objection certificate (NOC) from the respective state governments before acquiring approval from the GEAC for conducting field trials.

One of the triggers for this decision can be traced back to when Bihar Chief Minister Mr Nitish Kumar raised an objection to the GM crop field trials being carried out without the state's permission. The then environment minister, Mr Jairam Ramesh, had helped in the withdrawal of the permission granted by the GEAC to Monsanto India for conducting BRL-II trials for transgenic maize in Bihar on the basis of a request received from the chief minister of Bihar.

The GEAC at its 110th meeting, held on July 6, 2011, issued a resolution which states, Ã¢â?¬Å?In order to take the views of the state government on board and to promote their involvement in activities pertaining to GM crop field trials specially in its effective monitoring, it was decided that in respect of all GM crop field trials, the GEAC and the Review Committee on Genetic Manipulation (RCGM) would issue an approval letter only on the receipt of an NOC from the respective state government.Ã¢â?¬?

Mr Kapil Mishra, sustainable agriculture campaigner with Greenpeace defends the decision by saying, Ã¢â?¬Å?According to our constitution, agriculture is a state subject and the state governments have a the right to choose what can and cannot be grown in their states.Ã¢â?¬?

The impact of this rule has been felt by the bioagri companies, that were looking to carry out field trials of GM crops during this kharif season. Due to this development, over 100 proposals for field trials are pending with the GEAC for approval as they have not been issued NOCs by the state governments.

Mr Ram Kaundinya, CEO and managing director, Advanta Seeds and chairman of ABLE-AG, said, Ã¢â?¬Å?This rule will cause a delay in bringing GM technology to the masses. The second layer of regulation seems to be more of a bureaucratic step.Ã¢â?¬?

Sharing his thoughts, Mr M Prabhakar Rao, chairman, Nuziveedu Seeds, a leading bioagri company in India said, Ã¢â?¬Å?The regulatory system should be such that it facilitates the easy introduction of new products in different states of our country. We are prepared to follow any of the regulations imposed by the government but ask for uniformity across the different states.Ã¢â?¬?

India has been using Bt technology since 2002 when three Bt-cotton hybrids were approved for commercial cultivation. Indian farmers have since then taken to Bt technology in a big way with the total land area under Bt cotton in 2010-11 being 9.46 million hectare, which is over 85 percent of the total land under cotton cultivation in the country. A total of 780 Bt cotton introductions (779 hybrids and one variety) were approved for planting in 2010. The private sector is developing eight biotech crops, which include brinjal, cabbage, cauliflower, cotton, maize, okra, rice and tomato. Gujarat, Maharashtra and Andhra Pradesh are the leading producers of Bt cotton in India.

There is a fear among bio-agri companies that the result of leaving such a decision to the state governments would become more of a political issue than a scientific one, as different political parties have different outlooks towards GM crops. Bihar, Karnataka and Chhattisgarh have stated that they will not allow any field trials of GM crops. States such as Andhra Pradesh and Gujarat are said to have taken a positive stand and have constituted a committee to oversee this matter.

Providing more information, Dr N Seetharama, who has recently joined as the director of ABLE-AG, says, Ã¢â?¬Å?States that have issued NOCs for field trials include Haryana (for GM cotton and GM corn), Gujarat (GM cotton and GM corn), Andhra Pradesh (GM cotton and is contemplating GM rice) and Rajasthan (GM mustard).Ã¢â?¬?

This uncertainty has bred a lot of confusion among seed companies about the future of GM crops in India and has affected the bioagri companies. Reacting to this, Mr KK Narayanan, managing director, Metahelix, says,Ã¢â?¬? This seems like an abdication of responsibility from the GEAC. We had applied for field trials in Tamil Nadu, Karnataka and Maharashtra, and could not carry them out because of the resulting confusion and can now do so only next year. The spirit in which this rule has been enforced, for creating stricter regulations for field trials, is right but the manner is not right. The confusion regarding the final authority still prevails.Ã¢â?¬?

Another issue that is yet to be addressed in light of the decentralization of the approval system is that this rule may actually prevent the use of GM seeds in states that have not allowed trials to take place. Once the approval for GM crops has taken place it might be difficult to stop the influx of these seeds into states that previously denied permission for field trials. The unregulated use of GM seeds could lead to resistance by pests as it has in the case of Bollgard I in Gujarat and other states.

The way forward

The seed manufacturers have, as an organized body, decided to approach the government in order to address their concerns. Mr MG Shembekar, MD, Ankur Seeds, explains,Ã¢â?¬? The special interest group of the National Seed Association are going to put forth a proposal to the state government in November 2011 to reconsider the rule and enforce it from the next year when clearer guidelines are in place.Ã¢â?¬?

In light of the reports of major concerns over the safety of GM crops and the continuing protests against the introduction of Bt brinjal, it remains to be seen how well GM crops are received by the people. For now, the private sector has called for a regulatory system that is free of any political pressure and is uniform throughout the country. The real question that remains is whether specific uniform guidelines for all states will be prepared to issue NOCs in time for the rabi season, which starts in the month of November.

Manasi Vaidya