

Bangladesh farmers happy with Bt brinjal experience

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"I met with eight of the 20 Bt brinjal farmers during my visits to Bangladesh in May and July," said Frank Shotkoski, director of the Agricultural Biotechnology Support Project (ABSP II) at Cornell University, which is acting as a partner with the Bangladesh Agricultural Research Institute (BARI) in developing Bt brinjal. "None of them voiced dissatisfaction with the new Bt eggplant. Each farmer assured me that they had every intention of continuing to grow the crop during the dry season when bacterial wilt is less of a problem for them."

The insect resistant trait in the Bt brinjal is not designed to protect the plants against bacterial wilt infection or other agronomic challenges. Crop losses of some or all of the crop were suffered by three farmers in Gazipur, for instance, due to weather-related diseases. BARI is investigating whether the Bt brinjal variety offered was appropriate for the time of planting in Gazipur when local weather conditions were extremely wet. Institutional partners involved in the Bt brinjal project today released an interactive map (<http://wp.me/P4F4ac-4Q>) giving full details of the field performance of South Asia's first GMO food crop during its first season in the hands of Bangladeshi farmers.

Bt brinjal (locally known as "Bt begun" in the Bangla language) has been genetically engineered with a bacillus thuringensis (BT) gene enabling it to be resistant to the major pest of brinjal - fruit and shoot borer (FSB) - and therefore able to survive without major use of pesticides. Large amounts of pesticide targeted at the FSB are required for traditional brinjal cultivation in South Asia, and can have toxic effects on farmers' health and the local environment.

Using on-the-ground videos, photos and interviews, the interactive map at shows that the majority of farmers' experiences of Bt brinjal were positive. Good yields were harvested, and pest- and pesticide-free labelled Bt brinjal was sold for consumption in local markets. In all cases the Bt trait was observed to confer close to 100% protection against the fruit and shoot borer (FSB) pest, and no pesticides for FSB were used by farmers growing the crop.

In October 2013, the Bangladeshi government approved Bt brinjal for release. In a special ceremony in January 2014, 20 farmers from four districts -Gazipur, Jamalpur, Pabna and Rangpur - were selected to receive seedlings from Agriculture Minister Matia Chowdhury. Today's interactive map is the first comprehensive information to demonstrate the actual performance of Bt brinjal in the field from February onwards. The map was compiled via repeated field visits by staff from BARI and Cornell University. The intellectual property for the new varieties, following the donation of the new genetic material from Indian seed company Mahyco, is retained by BARI in the public sector. Farmers are encouraged to save seed, and Bt brinjal is available royalty--â€? free in perpetuity.

A large number of farmers reported that they had been visited by unnamed NGO activists and journalists, who had warned them - falsely - that consuming Bt brinjal would lead to cancer, paralysis or other diseases. Bt brinjal has also been the subject of unjustified negative publicity in Bangladeshi national media.

"One of the aims of the interactive map is to combat scare stories and conspiracy theories with full and transparent information about the project," said Shotkoski.