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'Government not recognizing biopesticides'

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To adapt to these challenges of tomorrow, innovation plays a key role in helping farmers grow yields sustainably and conserve natural resources.

Bangalore-based Camson BioTechnologies is aiming to fulfil this need by offering hybrid seeds, bio-fertilizers, and biocides that are non-poisonous, eco-friendly, and residue-free to the farming community.

Mr Santosh Nair, the CEO of the company, in an exclusive interview shares his company's plans with BioSpectrum.

Edited excerpts:

Q: Why Camson is planning to demerge its seeds business in to a separate company?
Mr Santosh Nair: This move will allow Camson to focus on its smaller but faster growing bio pesticide business. This would de-risk the business model, leading to a better valuation of the firm and would also be beneficial from a regulatory angle.
We would be naming our seeds business as Camson Seeds and bio-pesticide business as Camson Biotechnologies.

Q: Can you share the uniqueness of Camson Biotechnologies and Biocides?
Although synthetic chemical pesticides are often effective in controlling pests, many are acutely toxic and are suspected carcinogens. Repeated use of synthetic fertilizers leads to soil infertility, eutrophication of water bodies and accumulation of toxic heavy metals in soil.

Due to recent technological advances and increasing environment and safety concerns, biologically-derived products are becoming increasingly important components of Integrated Pest Management (IPM).

Derived entirely from microbes, Camson has created a unique range of bio-pesticides called Biocides. These are distinguished from synthetic pesticides by their unique modes of action, low toxicity to non-target species, biodegradability and natural occurrence.

Camson's Bio-fertilizers are also unique combinations of bio-agents that enhance the concentration of plant nutrients in the soil. Through biotechnology innovation, Camson's hybrid seed varieties offer maximum compatibility with organic and natural conditions and better yields.

Camson's range of Natural Fertilizers are a breakthrough in Agri-biotech research. The products are subjected to rigorous testing and are certified by government agencies and academic authorities.

Our products assure a balance of quality and unique attributes that make them the most favorable option for farmers.

Q: How does biocides work?
Microbial biopesticides and biofertilizers are formulates of secondary metabolites. These metabolites are bioagents beneficial to soil conditioning and improve the plant physiology and produce. They mobilize the micronutrients in the soil to maximize their utilization by the growing plant.

Unlike broad-spectrum synthetic chemicals, these products work specifically against certain pests, without harming other organisms. Since they are living strains, they assimilate into the ecosystem without leaving any toxic residues.

Q: How many farmers are using Camson's biocides?
Over 6 lakh farmers are using our bio-pesticides currently. We are reaching out to farmers through our 8000-9000 touchpoints and distributors.

The main challenge for us is that the government doesn't recognize bio-pesticides as an alternative for toxic rich urea or any other pesticides.

India offers huge subsidies on toxic based fertilizers. Farmers find that as a cheaper alternative compared to ours. The Indian pesticides market is about Rs 8,000 crore and growing at the rate of 5-7 percent p.a.

However, the awareness against the pesticides residue and the increase in export of fruits and vegetables from India has adversely affected the chemical pesticides business and its growth.

Q: How is your seeds business doing?
According to estimates, the global demand for food is likely to double by 2050 as world population multiplies and economic growth enables higher spending on food.

Meeting the food demand of the world, across developed and developing nations is the biggest challenge governments and the private sector face in the near future. With lands shrinking and agricultural land resources diminishing, the only way to meet the food demand is by producing more from less and protecting the produce from destruction.

We are addressing the food needs across the entire value chain. We are creating seeds for production of fruits, vegetables and more for the affordability-sensitive mass markets while our high-end non-seed tomato is aimed at the premium market segment.

Q: Can you share some R&D efforts on this?
Our seed R&D is focused on ensuring that consumers at the retail level get products which are healthy and 'user-friendly'.

For example, our ice box watermelon an oblong and smaller watermelon, which is ideal for small families and storage in home refrigerators. And our yellow skin watermelon, another compact variety of the fleshy summer fruit have been very well received. We are shortly launching Black Chillies in the market.

Through our investment in seed-based innovation, we have developed hybrid seed varieties that perform well under organic

and natural conditions.

This means that our seeds are tolerant to drought, pest attacks, and stress. Our unique seeds that have a long shelf life utilize natural conditions to provide higher yields and better margins to the farmer.

Looking towards the future we will remain focused on innovation and operational excellence. In a major step towards building a more sustainable future for the company, we have stepped up our research investments to more than 20% of our revenue.

We have also created a global supply chain function leading to an integrated supply unit, thereby creating the most efficient production models for our products.

Q: What would be the revenue mix of your seeds business and biotech business currently and how it would change in the future?
Currently seeds business is contributing around 70 percent of our revenues. Going forward we expect a ratio of 1:1, that is 50 per cent revenue from seeds and biotech business.

Q: What are your growth plans?
Our essential business opportunity is to convert farmers into using zero-residue Biocides and biofertilizers to ensure a safe produce.

Based on a living organism, Biocides are distinguished by their unique modes of action, low toxicity, biodegradability and natural occurrence. Sustainable development through non-toxic methods which are safe is the core value and mission of our R&D development.

We are in talks with institutional plantations firms like large coffee growers and tea plantations to use our biocides as an alternative to pesticides.

We are also educating farmers along with farming consultants and pushing our product through retail front as well.