

Moving technology from Lab-to-land a bottleneck

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Currently, India's private biofertilizer market is estimated to be worth Rs 500-600 crore and is expected to be growing more.

"The issue with biofertilizer and biopesticide market is that there is no proper check and control. The whole concept of organic manure and biofertilizer is getting killed because of the substandard materials used. I feel the government is responsible for this. A lot of awareness is being slowly created among farmers to go organic and chemical-free. This is a positive trend and it is picking up day-by-day," expressed Mr Mahesh G Shetty, MD, Multiplex Group of Companies, throwing light on the existing scenario on the biofertilizer market in India.

Multiplex began as a micronutrient manufacturing enterprise and then got into the business of pesticides in 1995-96. Later in 1999, the company's focus turned towards organic manures and biopesticides.

Speaking on the biofertilizer industry challenges, Mr Shetty opined, "The major issue is that, as for using biofertilizer in agriculture, the results are not immediate. There are many factors that determine the quality of the products including climate, weather, soil moisture, and pH among others."

He also feels that it is imperative to build confidence among farmers. "We need to instill confidence among farmers and the agricultural community that they can grow any kind of vegetables and field crops without using any chemical fertilizers or pesticides. Farmers have lost their confidence in biofertilizers. We need to create awareness among them and venture capitalists," he added.

The government needs to identify the right kind of partners since there are hardly any good-quality producing biofertilizer units within the government, he emphasized.

Mr Shetty also warns that in India, Chinese products are disguised as bioproducts which are dangerous chemicals and pesticides promoted by the government.

Biofertilizer and biopesticides are mostly produced through fermentation process which consume certain amount of time. "The whole process will take about 7-10 days," he explained. "Sadly, most state governments want instantaneous results. Hence, there is no proper pre-planning which is another challenge. Even if the government can give a month as a window period, we'll deliver them quality products. So they need to choose the right partners. Also moving technology from lab-to-land is not happening."

In the market today, there are great products that can replace dangerous and poisonous substances used in killing pests in the soil. The bioproducts can work better than chemical fertilizers by being totally harmless to animals, plants and even the soil.

The biofertilizer black market is valued at Rs 2000 crore, so well designed, that one would not get a bill as all the payments are done via cash. "The government is not able to track this black market," Mr Shetty lamented.

Multiplex has 600+ sales force, enabling it to carry multi location trials, and creating farmer awareness by keeping them fully informed about new innovations in the field of biofertilizers.

Some states have been declared as 'organic states' in India. "But this genuinely doesn't happen. Day-by-day chemical fertilizer prices are skyrocketing. This is where huge opportunity rests. With organic fertilizers, it's the other way around. The initial cost are a little high but later it drops down after a few years. This is the biggest advantage of biofertilizer," exclaimed Mr Shetty.

For biofuels, he advises that Pongamia will make a good choice. "Pongamia can grow anywhere and everywhere. In rural areas, Pongamia oil is used as an alternative to diesel. It acts as a good replacement," he told.

Talking about the future of Indian biofertilizer market, Mr Shetty optimistically said, "The future looks extremely good with the kind of research happening in India. We need to mass multiply and take bioproducts to people who require them. Fermentation is becoming expensive and sophisticated. In laboratory, moving from lab-to-land is a bottleneck. And that's the biggest challenge."

Multiplex exports its products to Japan, Ethiopia, Djibouti, UAE, Cypress, Mauritius, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka among others.

Mr Shetty concluded saying that biofertilizer is a wonderful field handled badly. "This needs immediate attention. If taken in the right direction, it can really save our precious soil. We can lead healthier lives, and save a lot on foreign exchange because today we import chemical fertilizers and pesticides from other countries," he ended.