BioSpectrum the business of Bio & Health Sciences

GM Mustard: Repeating Mistakes

19 January 2016 | Views | By BioSpectrum Bureau

GM Mustard: Repeating Mistakes

An alliance of farmers organizations has recently asked the central government not to proceed any further with field trials of GM mustard. They go further and are asking for a stop to the commercialization of GM mustard. The farmer alliance has in addition demanded that the Government of Punjab recommend to the Centre that all trials of GM mustard be halted. Punjab is an important mustard growing state and its farmers do not want GM mustard. So why is the government pushing for its release, moving ahead with its field trials? If the consumers of this technology have reservations and reject the genetically modified mustard, in whose interest is the government pushing it? Increasingly, GM crops are looking less and less like products that farmers want and more and more like something that someone else wants to force them to have.

One thing is clear to anyone who knows the agriculture sector, farmers are not stupid. They know what works for them and what doesn't. They are willing to experiment, accepting and adopting what is suited to their farming and rejecting what doesn't

make economic sense. Countering the push for GM crops based on the argument that it is high yielding, farmers in Punjab are pointing out that yield and productivity are not the issue, faulty government policies are the problem. They say that if proper support to crop cultivation and remunerative pricing are enforced as according to the legal framework in place, they should be, then new varieties of mustard are not required.

Safety issues can't be ignored

The commercialization of any GM food crop will of necessity have to demonstrate that it is safe for the environment and not harmful to human and animal health. This will be best achieved by sharing the results of safety testing with the public. But this is exactly what the developers of GM crops refuse to do. Requests for information on biosafety data are turned down citing that such information is 'confidential business information'.

This is utterly ridiculous. Information about the nature of the gene construct may be classified and the innovation may constitute 'confidential business information'. But under no circumstances can any information which could have a bearing on public health, be withheld from the public and be termed 'confidential'. The refusal of technology providers and technology regulators to be transparent and share information with the public has led to a growing distrust of GM technology. With the passage of time even those not greatly involved with the debate on GM crops are asking why the government/ industry is hiding data if the data are clean and there is nothing to fear? The more the technology providers hide data, the greater the likelihood of the public contesting the adoption of GM technology.

Liability has to be fixed

Then there is the issue of fixing liability. In its rush to promote GM crops, government agencies have not cared about bringing in a law on liability and redress. The recent Bt cotton failure reveals what can go wrong with GM technology. In the absence of a national law on liability and redress who is going to be held responsible for the crippling losses incurred by the farmers in Punjab and Haryana ? How will liability be fixed for the failure? Under which law will Monsanto, the owner of Bt technology and the Bt genes and their partner seed companies, be held accountable for the damage caused by the failure of the Bt cotton crop?

Gene Campaign has pointed out repeatedly that adopting the new transformative technologies which scientists acknowledge have potential dangers, without a strong legal framework within which the technology should be considered for adoption, is dangerous. It is irresponsible and unethical to expose farmers and consumers, to new technologies without ensuring that they are adequately protected incase the technology fails. In other countries this has been done by enacting laws governing liability and redress so that when a technology goes wrong, the technology provider is legally liable to make good the losses and clean up the mess.

The StarLink case is a good example of why laws on liability are important for societies wishing to go the GM route. StarLink is a genetically engineered corn hybrid which was cleared in the US as an animal feed but not as human food. In 2000 StarLink corn was detected in processed foods like taco shells. Aventis, the company that owned StarLink had to trace and buy back all the StarLink corn that had contaminated corn stocks in different parts of the US. They also had to cover the cost of cleaning and sanitizing equipment used to process corn from harvesting and cleaning to storage. It is estimated that in 2001, Aventis could have incurred a cost upto $ 1 billion to clean up the StarLink mess.

India continues to have an ad hoc approach to GM crops and those who should know better, have allowed a confrontational situation to develop. This is hardly intelligent. It would be advisable to conduct an honest dialogue about the pros and cons of GM technology and its relevance and use under Indian conditions.

Author's bio: *Dr Suman Sahai, who has had a distinguished scientific career in the field of genetics, is a recipient of the Padma Shri, the Borlaug Award and other numerous honors. She is founder chairperson of the Gene Campaign which is a leading research and advocacy organization, working on issues relating to food, nutrition and livelihoods.*