

Three States rebuff directive to test transgenic cotton

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NEW DELHI

Gujarat, Maharashtra and Telangana have rebuffed a proposal, approved by the Centre's Genetic Engineering Appraisal Committee (GEAC), to test a new kind of transgenic cotton seed.

The seed in question was developed by the Hyderabad-based Bioseed Research India and contains a gene, cry2Ai, that purportedly makes cotton resistant to pink bollworm, a major pest.

The seed has passed preliminary, confined trials and was recommended by the GEAC to be tested in farmer's fields at Janwada, Telangana; Jalna, Maharashtra; Akola, Maharashtra; Junagadh, Gujarat;

and Barwala-Hisar, Haryana. Under the current rules, transgenic seeds must be tested in open fields before they can hope to be cleared by the GEAC for commercial development. In most cases, companies interested in testing their seeds need approvals from the States for conducting such tests. Of the four States that Bioseed applied to, only Haryana gave permission for such tests.

States' responses

This was after the GEAC in October 2022 sent letters to all States to "communicate their views/comments" within two months on the proposal.

Apart from Haryana's approval in November, only Telangana responded to



Questions raised: GEAC has written to the States seeking their response over the matter within 30 days. FILE PHOTO

the GEAC's missive within that period, requesting a 45-day extension to consider the proposal. On May 16, Telangana responded that it will not allow trials to be conducted in the current 2023-24 cropping season. Gujarat later responded, saying that the proposal was "unacceptable" to it,

but did not furnish reasons.

Following a GEAC meeting on May 17, the minutes of which were only made public last week and have been viewed by *The Hindu*, the regulator wrote to Telangana, seeking its reasons for not taking up the trial in the current season;

to Gujarat, asking why the proposal was deemed unacceptable; and to Maharashtra, seeking its response within 30 days. "In case no response is received from them within the stipulated time, the GEAC will make appropriate recommendation in this matter," the records of the meeting show.

Educating the States

The GEAC has asked the Department of Biotechnology and the Indian Council of Agricultural Research to "...jointly organise capacity-building activities with regard to GM crops for apprising the State/UT Government(s) about the technology involved and the regulatory framework in place for evaluation of

these GM crops".

Activist groups have objected to the GEAC asking States to furnish reasons for disapproval. "When State governments like Telangana and Gujarat have declined to provide NOCs, GEAC is forcing them to provide reasons or break their silence. Why should a statutory regulator be pressuring State governments in this manner?... This is a biased lobbying approach that a supposedly neutral regulatory body is taking up," Kavitha Kuruganti, a member of the Coalition for a GM-free India, said in a statement.

Transgenic cotton is the only GM crop which has been approved and is currently being cultivated in fields in India.