

Business Standard, page no. 5
9-9-2016

'Fewer tests done for safety assessment of GM mustard'

SUBHAYAN CHAKRABORTY
New Delhi, 8 September

Activists have claimed that the environment safety assessment of the genetically modified (GM) variety of mustard, recently cleared as safe by a technical panel of the government, involved significantly fewer tests than had been done for the last such food crop, BT brinjal.

A technical sub-committee under the environment ministry had, on Monday, declared the Dhara Mustard Hybrid-11 (DMH-11) seed and the technology behind it to be safe for human consumption and the environment.

The regulator of GM technology under the ministry's Genetic Engineering Appraisal Committee (GEAC) had consulted with plant biologists, ecologists and environmentalists, before tasking the sub-committee with compiling all evidence and addressing key questions.

On Thursday, activists pointed to data from the ministry, alleging the number of tests, including field trials of the crop in various locations were lower than those conducted for BT brinjal. The Alliance for Sustainable and

Holistic Agriculture (ASHA) - a collective of organisations opposed to GM foods - said only Rajasthan, Punjab and Delhi allowed the field trial of the seed, as opposed to BT brinjal, when most states had given permission.

GM mustard is the second transgenic food to come up for regulatory approval after BT brinjal, which was cleared by GEAC under the previous United Progressive Alliance government. However, the ministry subsequently put a moratorium on its commercialisation amid widespread protest against GM food crops.

ASHA also said several accompanying tests, including pollen flow studies and crossability studies, which assess the health of the plant as well as its impact on the surrounding flora, were held fewer times than for the BT brinjal.

A number of tests on farm animals, including rabbits, chickens and goats, which had been done in the earlier case, were also not done, ASHA said.

On Tuesday, GEAC invited public comments on the findings till October 5. However, environmentalists and activists are not satisfied and have been

demanding that the ministry should make all the documents on the study, including a dossier on biosafety details, public. The 133-page report is an abridged version of the full dossier that generally accompanies applications by crop developers to the GEAC.

DMH-11 has been developed by a team of scientists at Delhi University, led by former Vice-Chancellor Deepak Pental under a government-funded project. Pental defended the research saying all requisite testing was done. "Major international research on GM crops has not had animal testing," he told *Business Standard*.

Activists have claimed GM crops constitute a threat to agricultural biodiversity, ecology and may threaten the livelihood of farmers.

"Since there was no review, there was no detection of wrong protocols, wrong analysis, wrong conclusions that were drawn," Kavita Kuruganti, convenor of ASHA, said.

If GEAC goes in favour of the commercial release of GM mustard, it will be the first genetically modified food crop to be cleared for cultivation in the country.

4

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9-9-2016