

Environment ministry holds GEAC meeting on GM field trials

Anubhuti Vishnoi, ET Bureau Sep 3, 2015, 09.12PM IST

NEW DELHI: After more than a year, the Prakash Javadekar led Environment Ministry today finally called a meeting of the Genetic Engineering Appraisal Committee (GEAC) to decide on field trials for a number of Genetically Modified (GM) crops.

GEAC is the apex body in India that is authorized to approve the use of genetically modified crops or organisms in the country.



Top government sources confirmed to ET that the GEAC met today to assess the feasibility of field trials of a number of GM crops. The GEAC last met on 18th July 2014- soon after the new government took charge.

"The GEAC did meet today and certain decisions were taken. However, they cannot be shared at this stage as minutes have to be made and the minister's approval is required as well", a senior official from the Union Ministry of Environment & Forests (MoEF) confirmed to ET.

Near 17 applications for field trials of six crops—Cotton, Corn, Brinjal, Chickpea, Rice and Wheat—were said to be pending with the GEAC currently. While Andhra Pradesh, Maharashtra, Kamataka and Punjab have granted No Objection Certificate (NOC) to field trails, they are still awaited from most other states.

The decisions taken at the GEAC were kept absolutely wrapped in secrecy at the Environment ministry. The members of the GEAC whom ET spoke to refused to share any information on the decisions taken at the meeting.

While the last regime also treaded rather slowly on the issue of GM crops- much to the dismay of many in the scientific community- the issue of allowing field trials of GM crops has been a contentious one under the Modi government as well. While Environment minister Prakash Javadekar has time and again maintained that science cannot be stalled, his ministry has been equally slow and rather unclear on the issue allegedly under pressure from right wing affiliates like Swadeshi Jagran Manch who have strongly opposed introduction of GM crops.

On the other hand, the industry has been calling for a scientific approach to the matter. Earlier this year, Biocon CMD Kiran Mazumdar Shaw had written to the PMO pointing out how the delay in calling meetings of the GEAC has put the "entire agriculture biotechnology sector in great difficulty".

Shaw who is also Chairperson of the Association of Biotech Led Enterprises wrote a letter to the Principal Secretary to the PM Nripendra Mishra as well saying that the failure to hold GEAC meetings and the consequent breakdown of the regulatory process had forced many to shut or scale down research programmes in agri biotechnology in India.

Pointing out that the GEAC is a statutory body required to meet at least once each month, Shaw had noted how the body has only met eight times in the last three years and had not considered any agri biotechnology applications since August 2014. The biotech industry is particularly concerned as with the delay in GEAC meetings, the upcoming Kharif season may be lost for field testing.

The two-tier regulatory framework for GM crops includes a Review Committee on Genetic Manipulation (RCGM) under Department of Biotechnology and the GEAC under the MoEF. The GEAC considers proposals for trial only after approval from the RCGM, a body comprising scientists well versed with the technology.