

GM crop trials to restart in Maharashtra

Panel sees no issues in field tests, gives favourable report to State govt

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The testing of genetically modified crops has received a new lease of life in Maharashtra with a committee set up under nuclear scientist Anil Kakodkar recommending that the trials be restarted.

In March, field trials of rice, corn, brinjal and chickpea commenced in farms controlled by State agriculture universities. The seeds were provided by companies such as Monsanto, Mahyco and BASF. But the trials had to be abandoned as the State Agriculture Department withdrew permission.

The NGOs that opposed GM crops, including RSS-affiliated Swadeshi Jagran Manch, had raised several technical issues including fears of cross-pollination between GM and non-GM crops.

Agriculture scientist and a member of the committee CD Mayee told *BusinessLine* that the objections have been addressed. "There is no issue as far as field trials are concerned. Confined field trials are regulated in Maharashtra

so they do not create any problems," he said.

An industry source said that due to the earlier ban, the kharif season had to be abandoned. Now, the rabi could be used to test seeds. A Maharashtra government official said final clearance for the trials could be given after Diwali.

Mahyco, through its group company Sungro, is developing a GM chickpea (chana). It has developed the seeds through a public-private partnership with Assam Agricultural University.

It claims that farm production could increase 20-25 per cent using its GM chickpea. Mahyco is also working on a

salt-tolerant variety of rice in the coastal Konkan region of Maharashtra.

'More clarity needed'

Despite all the assurances, National Co-convenor of Swadeshi Jagran Manch Ashwani Mahajan said the trials should not be allowed, as there is a need for more clarity, especially from the toxicity perspective.

The committee, he said, has not come clean on technical and environmental issues raised by the Manch.

Some experts on the committee have a conflict of interest, therefore a demand would soon be made for the formation of a national commission, which will look at all the aspects of GM crops, he said.

