

Farm research severely hit: biotech firms

Disconnect between Centre, States affecting pace of R&D; farmers denied benefits

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With the frequency of GEAC (Genetic Engineering Appraisal Committee) meetings coming down and several States acting slow on giving NOCs (No Objection Certificate) for GM field trials, the ABLE-AG (Association of Biotech Led Enterprises) has said that scientific research in agriculture has been severely hit.

Several firms have either shut down or slowed down research programmes, as uncertainty in getting permissions for field trials of genetically modified crops continues.

'Neighbours progressing'

"We lost 4-5 years in agricultural research, while countries like Vietnam, China and Bangladesh have progressed," Shivendra Bajaj, Executive Director of Association of Biotech Led Enterprises (ABLE-AG), told *BusinessLine*.

The association had thought the new regime at the Centre

would make it easier for the industry in getting approvals.

But protests against GM crops and research in this area got stronger, with Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS)-backed organisations putting pressure on BJP-ruled States to stop giving permissions for GM crop field trials.

The association feels the Centre has been favourable (for trials) but mandatory permissions from States were hard to come by.

"There is a strong disconnect between the Centre and States. Some States are not even equipped to clear proposals. Others try to repeat what the GEAC does. But they don't have the technical wherewithal to do that," he said.

Political angle

Ram Kaundinya, Director-General of ABLE-AG, said the States were not able to see the bigger picture.



Stiff opposition Several firms have either shut down or slowed down their research programmes, as the uncertainty in getting permissions for field trials of genetically modified crops continues

take a technical view, they are taking a political view on the issue," he said.

The Genetic Engineering Appraisal Committee, which works under the Union Ministry of Environment, vets the proposals from agricultural biotech firms before giving permissions.

However, the firms will have to take NOCs from respective States

al firms could not start trials even after getting the GEAC go-ahead, as some States tread a cautious path, keeping in view the politically sensitive issue.

Different response

While the Andhra Pradesh Government has approved trials in some crops, the Telangana Government has just formed a com-

mittee to vet the proposals. Other States such as Bihar, Kerala, and Jharkhand have taken a hard stance.

"There are certain technologies that could solve the problems of our farmers. For one, drought-tolerant maize and sugar cane could be of great help to them. But the present gridlock does not allow it to happen," Kaundinya said.