

Eyeing a harvest of GM crops, Centre readies draft policy

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NEW DELHI: The Centre is slowly setting the stage for more genetically modified crops after they pass the test of public safety parameters to expand beyond Bt cotton, the only transgenic crop currently cultivated. The agriculture ministry has come out with a draft policy for transgenic crops, laying down rules for licensing of GM seed technology in future – a clear indication that the Centre is keen to have guidelines in place.

Though the ministry came out with its policy on May 18, it withdrew it five days later for consultations with stakeholders, including different ministries, farmers, experts and industries. The rules will eventually be framed after taking into consideration the suggestions of the department of industrial policy and promotion (DIPP), which looks after the issue of intellectual property rights (IPR).

Agriculture minister Radha Mohan Singh told TOI: "Since this order will decide the licensing issue of GM seed technology of any crop in future, we felt the need to take everyone's views for wider consultations before coming out with a definite policy."

Asked about the need to have such a policy, Singh said, "There is a view that other GM seeds (other than Bt cotton) may be introduced and therefore there should be a licensing policy. It is for the future".

According to the May 18 draft licensing policy, the GM technology provider cannot deny a licence to any eligible Indian seed

company nor can it charge a royalty that exceeds 10 per cent of the maximum sale price of the seeds, which is to be fixed by the government every year. It specifies that the cap of 10 per cent will apply for the first five years. The royalty will decrease by 10 per cent a year from the sixth year onwards.

Though the central regulator on GM crops – Genetic Engineering Appraisal Committee of the environment ministry – has allowed field trials of 18 varieties of genetically engineered seeds in past two years, it has not approved commercial cultivation of any such crop.