

On genetically modified crops, policies go back and forth

SANJEEB MUKHERJEE
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It has been over a month since the deadline expired for receiving comments from stakeholders on the government's notification capping the royalty fee for all future genetically modified products.

To date, however, there has been no clarity on the rules regulating genetically modified (GM) seeds. The official explanation is that the deadline was only for fixing a time frame for stakeholder comments and not for either rescinding the notification or re-promulgating it.

Senior officials say the issue of GM traits and royalty fees are far too complex to be solved at the government level, and any decision on the matter should be best left to the courts.

The government appears to be going back and forth on the issue. In December last year, it came out with a notification appointing a panel to fix the retail price for BT cotton seeds.

The panel in March this year came out with its price recommendations and also fixed the royalty fee (trait value) that seed licence holders can charge from companies.

Then, even as Monsanto Mahyco Biotech (India), a joint venture of Mahyco Seeds and Monsanto, moved the Delhi High Court challenging the Centre's order, the government issued a second order in May regulating the bilateral agreements between seed companies and licence holders and laid down rules under which



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such agreements could be reached.

Following a massive furore, this notification was later withdrawn as the government decided to seek feedback from stakeholders before reaching a decision. The deadline for receiving comments expired over a month ago.

While some see the second notification as a sign of confusion within the government over GM crops, others believe its policies are clear. The notification was aimed at ending Monsanto's near-monopoly in the sector, they say.

The government wants other players to enter the market so that there are more suppliers of GM seeds. In doing that, the government is looking to develop its own GM cotton using a technology that has now gone off patent.

It has also been moving swiftly on GM mustard. A crucial committee on GM crops

under the environment ministry recently cleared a GM variety of mustard developed by a team of scientists led by former Delhi University vice-chancellor Deepak Pental. Though many more approvals are still needed before actual commercialisation can start, the quick action gives a hint of its stand on GM crops.

"This government just like most other governments in the past is not at all anti-GM. However, there are certain sections within this government that are worried about monopolistic tendencies of multinational companies, but overall it does not seem to me that the Monsanto saga and the GM-mustard episode anyway show any contradiction in its approach," says Kavitha Kuruganti of the Alliance for Sustainable and Holistic Agriculture.

Shivendra Bajaj, executive director, Association of Biotech-

Lead Industries (Agriculture), a pro-GM lobby group, welcomes the government's initiatives on GM crops.

"GM mustard has the potential to increase yields between 20 per cent and 30 per cent and this is a strong reason for commercial cultivation of the crop. This technology will reduce India's oil import bills, increase farmer incomes and bring more area under cultivation," says Bajaj, adding that India already imports oil derived from GM soybean and canola.

He has also welcomed the government's decision to withdraw the licensing guidelines and to put it up for public comments.

"Intellectual Property Rights in agriculture should be respected so that more technologies come into the country. We believe that the best way to reduce monopoly is to bring more competition," he adds.