

SC to hear plea against field trials of GM crops

Ministry gets 759 public comments on government panel's safe verdict on GM mustard

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New Delhi, 6 October

The Supreme Court will on Friday hear a petition calling for a stay on commercial release of all genetically modified (GM) crops, including a GM variety of mustard recently approved by a government panel.

The petition, filed by Aruna Rodriguez, sought a moratorium on open-field trials and commercial release of all herbicide tolerant (HT) crops such as the Dhara Mustard Hybrid DMH 11 seed, earlier certified as safe for human consumption and the environment by a technical sub-committee under the environment ministry.

On Thursday, the ministry said it had received 759 public comments on the decision of the sub-committee, after public protests by several environmental and farmers' organisations.

These have been forwarded to a sub-committee for review.

The petition also pleaded the court implement a recommendation of a Supreme Court-appointed committee to stay all GM testing. A technical expert committee had in 2012 advocated a 10-year moratorium on commercial release of GM crops, arguing the lack of definite information on long-term safety of GM crops on food crops.

On September 5, the technical sub-committee, under the environment ministry's Genetic Engineering Appraisal Committee (GEAC), the regulator for GM crops, had approved the environmental release of the hybrid DMH-11.

Activists have claimed several discrepancies on the part of the technical sub-committee in assessing the environmental impact of releasing the hybrid. The claims include one that assessment for DMH-11 involved significantly fewer tests than had been done for the earlier such food crop, BT brinjal.

While a sub-committee will now consider the suggestions, Environment



THE STORY SO FAR

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- The petition also pleaded the court to implement a recommendation of a Supreme Court-appointed committee to stay all GM testing
- On September 5, the technical sub-committee had approved the environmental release of the hybrid DMH-11
- GM mustard is the second transgenic food to come up for regulatory approval after BT brinjal

Minister Anil Madhav Dave on Thursday refused to fix a deadline on when the committee would resubmit its findings.

The recommendations have been just sent and the committee would take some time to assess these, he said. Earlier this week, the ministry had refused to extend the one-month deadline, which had ended on October 5, for receiving public feedback on the bio-safety dossier. This was despite several organisations, including

the Kisan Ekta Morcha, writing to Prime Minister Narendra Modi demanding a ban on the hybrid product.

GM mustard is the second transgenic food to come up for regulatory approval after BT brinjal, which was cleared by GEAC under the previous government. However, the ministry subsequently put a moratorium on its commercialisation, amid widespread protest against GM food crops.

The Alliance for Sustainable and Holistic Agriculture — a collective of organisations opposed to GM foods — said only Rajasthan, Punjab and Delhi allowed the field trial of the seed, as opposed to BT brinjal, when most states had given permission.

An association of biotech companies, ABLE-AG, said GM mustard does not show any change in resistance to major pests and pathogens of mustard in comparison to its non-GM counterpart.

The transgenic varieties showed no differences in agronomic performance when compared to unmodified counterparts under the same conditions, it added.

Also, it said a potential impact on biodiversity was unlikely because the technology has not altered the weediness and aggressiveness of GE mustard in comparison to its non-GE counterpart.