

Tough talk on GM crops

Govt affidavit on GM mustard rips into some activists

Getting the final go-ahead for GM mustard may still take a while, but if the ministry of environment, forests and climate change (MoEFCC) affidavit in the Supreme Court is anything to go by, the government has decided to take a tough line on the protests against allowing the crop. The affidavit, in response to Aruna Rodrigues' petition, is unusually forceful and goes on to call the petitioners liars whose sole motive appears to be ensuring India does not allow either GM research or GM crops to take off. The affidavit, not surprisingly, begins by talking of how, thanks to low farm productivity, India imported ₹68,000 crore of edible oils in FY16, and then goes on to say the government is committed to ensuring adequate R&D to meet the needs of farmers and to help them increase their incomes significantly.

Where it departs from the usual language of affidavits is after this. After impressing upon the SC that India has a multi-layered regulatory approval system—the current GM mustard trials, it is important to keep in mind, began way back in 2003—with well thought-out safeguards, the MoEFCC affidavit points out that though public responses had been called for, the petitioners had not responded to this, choosing instead to approach the court and use various public fora to influence the debate. The affidavit says the insertion of the genes into the mustard hybrid 'did not lead to disruption of any known endogenous gene coding for a protein' and then goes on to talk of the fact that, globally, 'there is 20 years of history of safe use of proteins' used in the GM mustard seed being tested. It accuses the petitioners of 'blatant' lies and 'willfully making confusing statements', some of which are 'a surreptitious attempt to seek moratorium on field development of hybrid seed development technology in mustard and is completely malafide'. If this wasn't enough, the affidavit also takes on the argument by petitioners who claimed it was difficult and expensive for them to come to the MoEFCC office in Delhi to examine the GM mustard dossier—the ministry says 'there is adequate evidence... in media and photographs in newspapers to prove that most of the petitioners were in Delhi participating in dharnas, debates... and lobbying political parties during the period when all information was open for public consultation'. As for PM Bhargava's complaint that he did not get the necessary documents, the affidavit submits proof of when the documents were sent, and concludes by saying 'it is an avowed goal of the petitioners to derail and hijack the regulatory processes on GE crops in the country which is based on best international practices of risk assessment, monitoring and management'. While there is still a way to go in the process, the unusually strong affidavit suggests the government may also be willing to override the SJM and the RSS opposition to GM crops.