

# Genetically modified crops' field trials put on hold

Decision marks first successful policy intervention by Swadeshi Jagaran Manch

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In a move that marks the first successful policy intervention of Swadeshi Jagaran Manch and Bharatiya Kisan Sangh — both affiliates of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) — the Narendra Modi-led central government has put field trials of genetically-modified (GM) crops on hold.

Representatives of the two RSS-backed outfits on Tuesday met Environment, Forests & Climate Change Minister Prakash Javadekar and apprised him of their concerns over an approval given to field trials of GM crops. "The minister assured the members of Swadeshi Jagaran Manch (SJM) and Bharatiya Kisan Sangh (BKS) that the decision (on field trials) had been put on hold," Ashwani Mahajan, all-India co-convenor for SJM, said in a press statement.

Sources in the ministry said Javadekar put on hold the clearance given to GM crops' field trials by the Genetic Engineering Approval Committee (GEAC). They also said the decision was now likely to be put on the back burner.

At a meeting on July 17, its first after the Modi government took charge at the Centre, GEAC had approved field trials of 13

## TRIAL & ERROR?

▪ **Feb 2010:** Then environment minister Jairam Ramesh puts commercial release of Monsanto Bt Brinjal on hold; field test of other varieties and crops continue

▪ **May 2012:** In a public-interest suit, Supreme Court sets up expert panel to review issue

▪ **Aug 2012:** Parliament's standing committee on agriculture demands moratorium on field trials of all GM food crops and a complete policy overhaul

▪ **Oct 2012:** SC's expert panel suggests a moratorium on GM trials; central government opposes this, puts its nominee in



the committee

▪ **Mar-Jun 2013:** The Genetic Engineering Appraisal Committee recommends trials of some GM food crops but the then minister Jayanthi Natarajan puts the plan on the back burner

▪ **Jul 2013:** SC expert panel's majority report again advises a moratorium; govt nominee bats for trials

▪ **Aug 2013:** Natarajan writes to PMO opposing trials of GM food crops; then PM Manmohan Singh and the then agriculture minister Sharad Pawar bat for the GM technology

▪ **Feb 2014:** As environment minister, M Veerappa Moily renews lapsed clearances for food crops, promises more

▪ **Jul 17, 2014:** Under Prakash Javadekar, GEAC recommends GM trials for 13 food crop varieties

▪ **Jul 29, 2014:** Swadeshi Jagaran Manch and other RSS affiliates object; Javadekar puts final decision on hold

GM crops, including those of mustard, cotton, brinjal, rice and chickpea. At that time, SJM had termed the decision "a betrayal of people's trust". GEAC, comprising senior environment ministry and other government officials, besides experts, is the

statutory body for recommending approval to any release of genetically-engineered products into the environment. Field trials by companies and researchers in open farms across the country to test their products also fall under its ambit.

The agenda for GEAC meet, like in the case of other statutory bodies, is set after informal consultations at the ministerial level. Its recommendations require approval from the environment, forests & climate change minister.

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Javadekar GM crops posed a challenge to the issue of India's food security.

"In India, as in many other parts of the world, a few multinational corporations (principally Monsanto) have a virtual monopoly on the GM technology. If a country's food production becomes overly dependent on seeds and other inputs from a handful of such companies, will it not compromise its food security," Mahajan asked.

SJM, Mahajan said, urged the minister not to rely on "biased and manipulated reports of vested interests among industry". It advised him to institute independent enquiries on the likely impact of GM food crops on soil, human health and health of other species, to ensure no harm was done to the traditional gene pool/biodiversity of the soil, food security and health of the people of India.

The Bharatiya Janata Party's manifesto for this year's Lok Sabha elections had said: "GM foods will not be allowed without full scientific evaluation of their long-term impact on soil and production, and biological impact on consumers." SJM, which is the RSS's economic policy arm, has consistently and publicly opposed the introduction of GM food crops in the country.

In the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) regime, the government had remained divided on the issue. As environment minister, Jairam Ramesh had put a moratorium on one BT brinjal experiment, sparking a debate, while his successor, Jayanthi Natarajan, had strongly opposed all food crop trials and held back clearances given by GEAC, citing an ongoing Supreme Court case.

Manmohan Singh, the then prime minister, and Sharad Pawar, agriculture minister in his government, had advocated for GM crops, pushing for this to be put as the government's official stance before the Supreme Court. M Veerappa Moily, who took over from Natarajan at the environment ministry, gave his go-ahead to about two dozen field trials of food crops, claiming his predecessor had misread the facts of the Supreme Court case.

According to the ministry's internal notes, more than 100 crop varieties, including those of cereals, fruit and vegetables, are in various stages of development and testing. The Biotechnology Regulatory Authority Bill, moved by UPA to hand over control and oversight of the GM technology to the promoting department of biotechnology, lapsed with the dissolution of the 15th Lok Sabha.

SJM had largely welcomed the Modi government's railway and finance budgets tabled in Parliament earlier this month.

## Genetically modified...

Today, the joint SJM-BKS delegation reminded the minister that Parliament's standing committee on agriculture had recommended in its report on GM food crops, tabled in Parliament on August 9 last year, "stopping all field trials under any garb" until regulations and oversight were overhauled and made better.

The delegation pointed out that the technical expert committee, appointed by the Supreme Court and comprising eminent scientists, had also advised against any open release of GM crops, including through field trials, until a robust regulatory mechanism was put in place.

The outfits' representatives requested the minister that no field trials of GM crops be allowed without proper scientific evaluation of their possible long-term impact on human health and soil, as the decision to introduce a 'foreign gene' in the environment was irreversible.

They argued there was no scientific study to prove the GM technology increased productivity and told

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