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Biotech regulators show conflict of interest

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NEW DELHI: Several officials who sit on India's biotech regulator, which is preparing to take a decision on genetically modified (GM) mustard, are also associated with global organisations that lobby for GM crops, HT has learnt.

Such an arrangement represents potential conflicts of interest, according to critics, who argue that there must be an arm's length distance.

On Wednesday, the Genetic Engineering Appraisal Committee (GEAC), the regulator empowered to clear transgenic crops for commercialisation, released an assessment report of GM mustard on its website for public comments. Scientists who serve as regulators are mostly GM crop developers themselves, another area of conflicting roles.

The co-developer of GM mustard, Akshay Pradhan, is also a

regulator. Pradhan told HT he voluntarily sat out of all meetings concerning GM mustard. "So there is no question of conflict of the interest," he said.

A GM crop is one in which a gene has been altered for new traits, such as pest resistance or nutritional value. GM mustard, a public-sector developed variety, is the second transgenic food to come up for regulatory approval after BT brinjal, which was indefinitely suspended by the previous UPA government despite being cleared by the GEAC.

Regulators linked to industry-backed non-profits or who have been privately funded GM developers said they were open about their affiliations. They denied any ethical problem because they acted in accordance with the regulator's rules. Critics, however, say this is a serious case of a compromised regulatory framework.

Such officials include the GEAC co-chair K Veluthambi, B Sesikeran, a nutrition scientist,

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and crop scientist SR Rao.

Rao is on the Golden Rice Humanitarian Board funded by an agri-business MNC; among others. Sesikeran is a member of the International Life Sciences Institute (ILSI), a global non-profit partly funded by firms to promote science in agriculture, including GM technologies. According to its website, "ILSI's funding comes primarily from its corporate membership and supporting companies." These include GM crop companies.

"Being a regulator doesn't mean you are here to destroy GM science. If you are an airline regulator, does it mean you have to destroy the airline sector? We are here to promote

GM science and there is nothing secret about it, only thing it has to be scientifically sound and safe," Sesikeran said.

GEAC co-chair Veluthambi is a scientist behind a GM rice project. Both Veluthambi and Rao could not be reached for comments. But their colleague, Pradhan, said: "How can you go on suspecting public scientists? GEAC has to depend on the same scientists because they are the only ones available."

Mere stepping out of meetings does not address the problem, said Kavitha Kuruganti, who represents an anti-GM advocacy group. She said the regulatory body needs risk-assessment experts as regulators, not GM crop developers.

"There is only one reason why modern biotechnology needs regulation — that of protecting us from risks. That is not being fulfilled with industry-affiliated and other crop developers working as regulators," Kuruganti said.

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