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Govt puts on hold expert committee's decision on field trials

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE

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GM CROPS

IN a move that is likely to come as bad news for the scientific community backing introduction of Genetically Modified crops in the country, the new NDA government has, as of now, decided to hold in abeyance the recent decision of an expert committee of the Environment Ministry to recommend field trials of 15 GM crops.

While the Genetic Engineering Approval Committee (GEAC) cleared 15 proposals for field trials of varieties of rice, brinjal, chickpea, mustard and cotton, the Prakash Javadekar-led Ministry of Environment & Forests has not given a green signal for the same, which is required for field trials to be conducted. The ministry's reluctance comes against the backdrop of RSS linked outfits opposing field trials of GM crops.

Representatives of the Swadeshi Jagran Manch and the Bhartiya Kisan Sangh Tuesday called on Javadekar seeking a ban on field trials. They pointed out that the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Agriculture, in its 2013 report, had called for stopping field trials. They also told the minister it would not be advisable to allow GM crops in the country without adequate scientific evaluation and assessment of their impact on people's health.

The outfits claimed the minister gave them a positive assurance. "The minister assured the delegation the decision on field trials of GM crops has been put on hold by the government," Ashwani Mahajan, all India co-convenor of the Manch, said.

When contacted, Javadekar said the decision on field trials was not yet taken by the ministry. "It is not a government decision. It is the decision of a committee... how can we decide until proper consultations?" he said.

Incidentally, he had said the same thing to distance himself from the recent GEAC decision. On July 21, he had tweeted, "Field trials of GM crops is not a government decision. It is a recommendation of a committee."

Javadekar's cautious response is in line with his party's stand and the fact that the issue is sub judice. The BJP manifesto had said that proceeding forward on GM crops would only be advisable when a strong regulatory mechanism is in place.

Incidentally, former environment minister Jayanthi Natarajan had also decided to put all field trials on hold, but her successor Veerappa Moily had promised a fresh start by calling the GEAC meeting after nearly a year in 2014.

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