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How a 3,000-year-old pea could ease the country's inflation woes

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On a campus in South India, Kiran Sharma and his team of biologists are perfecting a recipe that may solve the nation's inflation woes.

Sharma, for six years, has been testing a new variety of pigeon pea, a 3,000-year-old indigenous crop used to make dal, a staple of the diet in India. By adding a gene to the seed's DNA, he hopes to make it pest-proof, boost output by 30 per cent and help reduce dependence on imports in

a country that's both the world's biggest producer and consumer of dry legumes, also known as pulses.

"Insects are one major problem if you want to increase the productivity of the pigeon pea, then genetic engineering is the only way of doing it," said Sharma, who for more than 20 years has worked for the International Crops Research Institute for the Semi-Arid Tropics (ICRISAT). After initial trials in a lab and a green house, "we have some material we're reasonably satisfied with."

Borrowing Costs

Widespread use of the revamped pigeon pea known locally as tur dal has the potential to boost yields that are less than half of China's, and could help the country reach its longer term inflation target of 4 per cent, lowering borrowing costs. Yet it could take years to get to market: Many states in India oppose genetically modified crops, and won't allow field trials.

"This is caught between different groups," said Devendra Kumar Pant, chief economist at

Mumbai-based India Ratings and Research Pvt. "The need right now is to increase productivity. How it will go up, that is for the government to decide."

Sharma at ICRISAT has waited three years for state-level authorisations to test his pigeon peas in a confined field, the next stage in the process. While he has a permit from the Central government, he hasn't received approval from authorities in Telangana, the State where the field trials would take place. Pocharam Srinivas Reddy, Telangana's Agricul-

ture Minister, didn't respond to multiple requests for comment.

Sungro Seeds Pvt., a New Delhi-based company that won the license for Assam Agricultural University's genetically modified chickpea, got the green light from just one state for field trials, out of the 11 where it applied. The pest-resistant chickpea could increase output by at least 20-25 per cent, according to the company.

"This additional requirement has become a major hurdle in the regulatory evaluation process of Biotech crops in the recent years,

with no defined process being available with the state governments for the certificate," Sungro said in an e-mail, referring to State-level approval.

Back at ICRISAT, Sharma and his team have other, somewhat more futuristic projects to keep them busy. That includes fortifying peanuts with vitamin A, which many people lack in the country.

"GM technology is here to stay sooner or later it will be routine," he said. "I don't think a good technology can be stopped."

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