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Make GM mustard data public: CIC

Genetically modified cotton is the only transgenic crop commercially available for cultivation now

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NEW DELHI: The Central Information Commission (CIC), arbitrator on Right To Information requests, has asked the Environment Ministry to make public all the data pertaining to the safety of genetically-modified (GM) mustard, sans proprietary intellectual property data. GM mustard is likely to be the first transgenic seed, to be available in farmer fields. It has had a tumultuous history in India with activist groups claiming that it will be a gateway to several other GM food crops — tomato, rice, brinjal, etc. — and that these may pose health and ecological risks. Currently, GM cotton is the only transgenic crop commercially available in farmer fields.

The GM mustard in question has been developed by Deepak Pental, a geneticist at Delhi University, with support from the National Dairy Development Board and the Department of Biotechnology. The technology involves



Activists protesting against GM mustard in New Delhi. — FILE PHOTO: R.V. MOORTHY

using a complex of genes, sourced from soil bacterium, which makes it easier for seed developers to easily develop hybrid varieties of mustard, generally a self pollinating plant. Hybrids varieties are generally known to produce greater yields but they necessitate farmers to keep going to seed companies every year to

buy fresh seed. The technology, according to Mr. Pental, will contribute to increasing yields of such hybrids by 25% of existing varieties. Kavitha Kuruganti leads the Alliance for Sustainable and Holistic Agriculture, which also campaigns against GM crops. Ms. Kuruganti — who petitioned the CIC — avers

that the GM seeds so produced aren't substantially better than existing mustard varieties and that seed developers and biotechnology regulators have colluded to "push" GM mustard. She also argues that in spite of multiple requests, the department hasn't made a copy of the biosafety dossier, which details

the GM mustard variety's performance, available publicly.

"The Commission directs the public authority to verify and provide such information... specifically the biosafety dossier as submitted by the crop developer... and any other material submitted by them and under review, after separating confidential information, if any, as per their independent decision. The Commission also directs all biosafety data pertaining to all other GMOs in pipeline as that is part of voluntary disclosure under Section 4 of the Right to Information Act..." reads the order, seen by *The Hindu*. These details are expected to be made available by April 30 after the seed developers have edited out potential proprietary information, Ms Kuruganti added. "Through the hearing, the Environment Ministry was asked why this data wasn't voluntarily uploaded... I'm not sure if it will be available on the website but once we get it, we will certainly make it public," Ms Kuruganti told *The Hindu*.

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