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No fresh tests for GM mustard

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NEW DELHI: The Environment Ministry is unlikely to prescribe fresh tests to ascertain the safety of genetically-modified (GM) mustard even as environmental activists on Monday alleged that the GM mustard, under scrutiny, contained genes that conferred herbicide tolerance (HT). However, these crops are unlikely to be recommended for release anytime soon, officials told *The Hindu*.

As part of an ongoing case on GM crops in India, a Supreme Court Technical Expert Committee has already recommended a ban on HT crops.

A coalition of activists, opposed to GM crops, proffered evidence to the Genetic Engineering Appraisal Committee (GEAC) on Monday to show that GM mustard being tested was not superior in yield to existing mustard varieties.

"We've heard them out and a sub-committee will look into the concerns...but



A protest against genetically modified mustard in Delhi.

— FILE PHOTO: R.V. MOORTHY

these are not HT crops," said a GEAC official privy to the discussions. "One of the genes is a marker used to differentiate hybrids from non-hybrids. It won't require more or less chemicals than existing mustard varieties," the official said.

Beyond GEAC's scope

Another official, who also did not want to be identified, said issues of yield were beyond the scope of the GEAC. "There are already other committees [within the agri-

culture system governance mechanism] tasked with looking at whether their yields are superior or they are fit for commercial release. So far, no fresh tests appear to be needed," the official said. The GEAC is an expert body of the Environment Ministry tasked with assessing if GM crops risk. While the body must approve every application to test GM crops, the most contentious crop on its table now is a type of mustard that contains three genes sourced from soil bacterium.

It has had a tumultuous history with activists claiming that it would be a gateway to 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 fields. The GM mustard has been developed by Deepak Pental, a geneticist at the Delhi University, with support from the National Dairy Development Board and the Department of Biotechnology.

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