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We must invest more in R&D to beat Bt monopoly: ICAR chief

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The Indian Council of Agricultural Research (ICAR) has said that it is important to break the monopoly in Bt cotton, the only genetically-modified crop in the country, to safeguard the interests of farmers.

The newly-appointed ICAR Director-General Trilochan Mohapatra has said the public systems must increase investments on research to come up with alternatives in case Monsanto quits the country.

Mohapatra took charge of Secretary (Department of Agricultural Research and Education) and Director General, ICAR from S Ayappan last month.

"India is a huge market for them and I don't think they would withdraw from this important market. But in the event of their leaving the country, we must be prepared with alternatives to take care of the interests of the farmers," he told *BusinessLine*.

Mohapatra was in the city to take stock of the research activity in the institutes in the city that come under the purview of the ICAR. "It is true that the country has benefited from the Bt cotton technology. We have tasted the success. It helped in increasing country's cotton exports and productivity," he said.

"The company (Monsanto) licensed the Bt technology (to Mahyco Monsanto Biotech) and it in turn sub-licensed it to scores of seed firms. Bt cotton hybrid seeds mushroomed. There're over 1,500 hybrid with Bt embedded in it hit the market ever since the technology was introduced," he said, explaining how fast the adoption spread in the country.

"But how much do the farmers pay for the seed? The government has a responsibility to take care of the interests of the farmers. Both sides have different views and discussions on," he said.

He pointed out that this also showed how the country depended on one agency (Monsan-



Trilochan Mohapatra, Director-General, ICAR

to) for the technology, creating a monopoly. "In case if it leaves, it emphasises the need for the public system to invest more on research to take care of the needs of our farmers. It also ensures we are not over dependent on one particular agency (Monsanto)," he said.

"We must see to it that there is no monopolisation of the marketplace. If that happens, we are in trouble or we might be in trouble. The government is getting ready with alternatives. The CICR (Central Institute of Cotton Research) has made some progress in this regard. There's a need to invest more and a greater effort required. We will live up to the aspiration," Mohapatra said.

Challenges

On the challenges the agricultural sector is facing, the ICAR Director-General said climate change posed a big challenge. Temperatures and extreme rainfall events have gone up, adversely impacting crops. "Submergence and flooding cause damage to crops like paddy, maize and soya," he said.

He said the ICAR institutes had been developing varieties that could withstand such extreme weather conditions.

Pulses and oilseeds too were a cause of concern for the country as it spent ₹60-65,000 crore on importing these commodities. "We need to take measures to achieve self-reliance in pulses and oil seeds," he observed.

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