

Hindu Business line, P-17, 12-4-16

Monopoly by seed companies will not be allowed, says Farm Minister

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA
New Delhi, April 11

The Central government will keep regulating prices of cotton seed and will not allow companies like the US biotechnology major Monsanto to exploit farmers, Agriculture Minister Radha Mohan Singh said today.

The minister asserted that the government would not allow "monopoly by seed and pharmaceutical companies" and regulate prices of seeds and medicines, if required. The Centre in December had issued an order to control cotton seed prices including trait or royalty value, effective from 2016-17 crop year (July-June).

Last month, the government for the first time fixed a uniform price of ₹800 per packet (of 450 gm) for Bt cotton seed including a small royalty of ₹49 - a move that will benefit farmers, but hit the Indian business of Monsanto.

"It (Monsanto) is a good company. We respect them, but that does not mean you loot farmers and charge whatever price, because you have knowledge. Be it seed or pharma, we will continue to regulate prices, whenever required," Singh said.

The minister was addressing a two-day kharif conference here to chalk out the preparedness for the upcoming sowing season.

"Anyone's monopoly should not be allowed. Technology should be used for welfare of farmers. Companies like Monsanto should not be allowed to exploit farmers just because they have technology. Be it seed or pharmaceutical company, we should see to it that there is no monopoly. We will keep regulating prices of seeds and medicine," the minister said.

The trait value has been reduced by over 70 per cent for the season 2016-17 starting next month despite Monsanto's threat to quit the country.

Monsanto had last month warned of re-evaluating presence in India and holding back new technology if the government cuts trait fee of Bt cotton seeds drastically through "arbitrary and potentially destructive" interventions.

Mayhco Monsanto Biotech Ltd (MMBL), a joint venture firm of Monsanto, had challenged the government's seed control order in the Delhi High Court in December.

MMBL has sub-licensed Bt cotton seed technology since 2002 to various domestic seed companies.

Farmers bought Bt cotton seeds in the price range of ₹330-1,000 per packet across the country in 2015-16 season.

Fair trade regulator Competition Commission of India (CCI) has also launched a probe against MMBL for alleged abuse of market dominance after it received complaints from the industry as well as from the farmer wing of BJP.

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Haryana uses drone to assess crop loss

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA
Chandigarh, April 11

To make accurate assessment of crop loss due to inclement weather, Haryana has started using drone technology on a pilot basis.

"Drone technology will bring transparency and accuracy in assessment of crop loss. Moreover, it will also put an end to complaints lodged by farmers who accuse revenue officials of not making correct loss assessment," Haryana Space Applications Centre chief scientist RS Hooda told PTI today.

"Haryana is the first State to use drone technology for crop loss assessment," he said.

The use of drone in assessing crop loss will also considerably reduce complaints of affected farmers who usually accuse revenue officials of negligence in assessment of crop damage whenever State government announces compensation.

Pilot project

Crop loss assessment through drone technology was conducted on a pilot basis in few villages of Hisar and Gurgaon, Hooda said. "We used drone to assess wheat and mustard crop loss because of hailstorm and untimely rains. We are expecting more than 90 per cent accuracy in results and if the pilot project is successful, we can use it on operational basis in future."

Pune's Science and Technology Park, which is promoted by Centre's Science and Technology Department has deployed German manufactured imaging drone in Haryana for the purpose.

"Drone which is called unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) is fitted with scanning sensors and it can capture the image of affected area with a resolution of 3.5-cm with detailed imaging from a height of about 200 metres," Hooda said, adding that it would help in assessing accurate percentage of crop damage. Last year, when Haryana government disbursed compensation to the tune of ₹1,092 crore for wheat damage due to untimely rains and hailstorm, many farmers complained of inaccurate crop loss assessment.

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