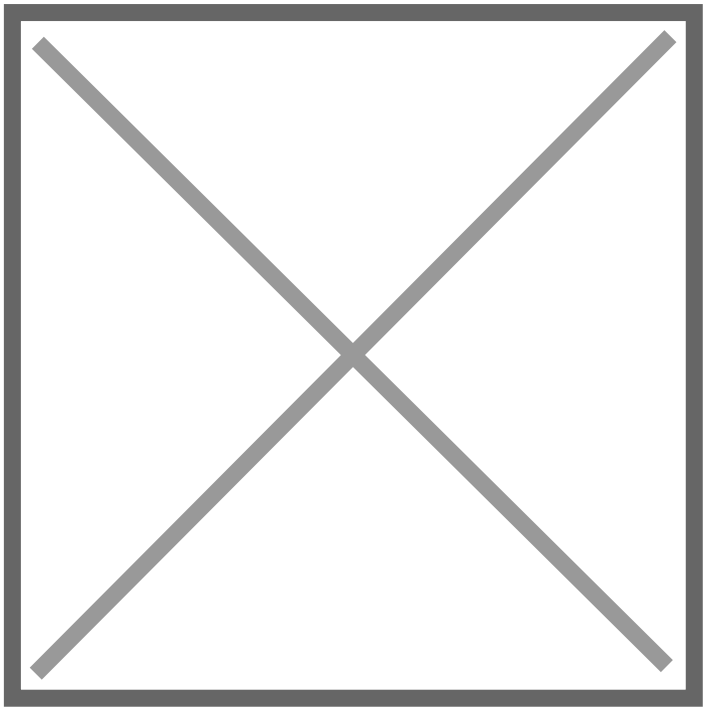
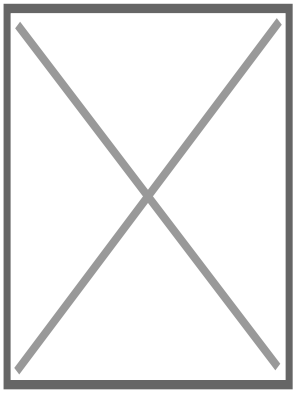


Will science prevail in biotech?

05 May 2010 | News





After nearly three months of complete silence since the announcement of the moratorium on commercialization of genetically-modified (GM) brinjal crop, the issue is likely to come back into the public arena once again. All eyes are now trained towards the May 19 meeting of the regulatory body, the renamed Genetic Engineering Appraisal Committee (GEAC) in New Delhi.

This is a routine monthly meeting of the regulatory agency in the Ministry of Environment and Forests. However, on its agenda this time is the scrutiny of the voluminous data of submissions by various scientists, industry associations, representations of farmers, anti-GM activists and other points raised during the public consultation process conducted by Environment Minister Jairam Ramesh. GEAC may take a call whether further testing will be required to satisfy the “public anger” generated against Mahyco’s Bt brinjal variety in early 2010.

The anti-GM groups are upping the ante and have already started a whispering campaign that GEAC may listen to the BioAgri industry and give another go ahead for Bt brinjal commercialization. Technically, the GEAC approval given to the commercialization on October 14, 2009 stands. The February 9, 2010 announcement of the moratorium by the Environment Minister is an administrative nature. Almost all the scientists and legal experts I spoke to are bewildered by the “moratorium” because there is no legal backing for such a decision.

GEAC’s routine decisions are just compiled and circulated to the applicants, all members and relevant institutions. There is no provision for a ministerial intervention in such matters. Because, GEAC is the statutory authority and its decisions are final, unless overturned by the Supreme Court. Things are in a limbo only because the BioAgri industry has decided to lie low in the face of overwhelming anger generated against it by the anti-GM groups.

In this issue’s Cover Story on Bt brinjal, we have tried to highlight the despair that is now prevailing in the Rs 2,000 crore BioAgri industry. Prime Minister Manmohan Singh had clarified in late February that there is no government policy against GM food crops. This has come as balm to the wounded industry. However, ground realities are different. Almost all the companies which are working on various GM food crops have slowed down the development work. They are not sure whether regulatory approvals will be forthcoming even to conduct field trials to generate data about the various traits. Some research groups have turned their focus to using genetic modification to develop crops with traits for drought resistance, salt tolerance, enhanced nutrition and disease resistance. In a way, these are good developments because India needs crops which can withstand recurring droughts and also use large tracts of high saline lands more productively.

It is not just GM crops that are facing the heat in the country. In a rare case, even a biopharma product has come under fire. The ongoing trials for two cervical cancer vaccines, Gardasil from Merck and Cervarix from GSK, have been halted by the government after reports about the death of six young girls in Gujarat and Andhra Pradesh who were administered these vaccines during the trials. The cervical cancer vaccine has become part of the immunization programme in Australia and

many other countries. An Indian version is also under development at Shantha Biotech.

The recent setbacks to the cancer vaccine and Bt brinjal raise the question whether as a nation we are ready to enjoy the fruits of modern technologies. About the Bt brinjal controvery, Dr Swapan Dutta, DDG of ICAR optimistically remarked that ultimately “science will prevail.” The government is unable to push through the legislative backing for a science-based biotechnology regulatory system for the last six years. I sincerely hope that “science will prevail” in biotech in the short run too.

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