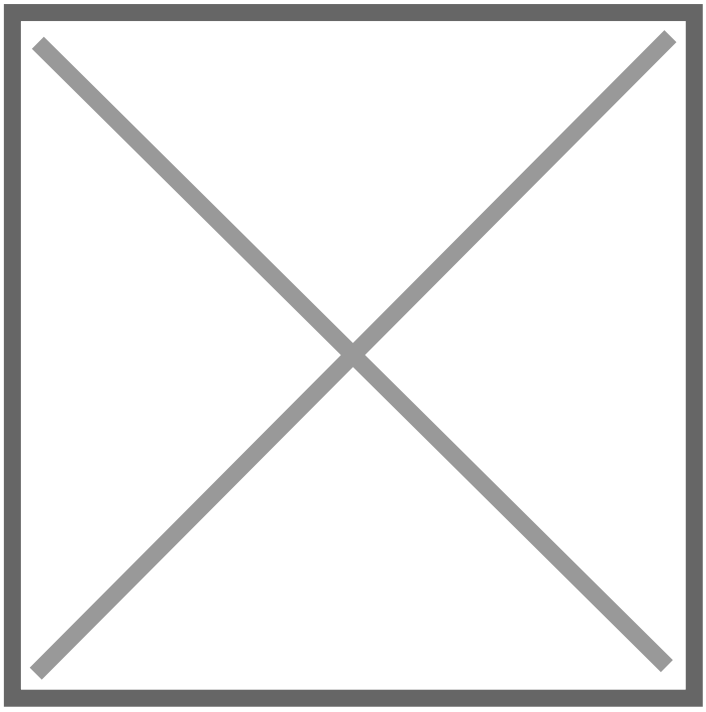
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Bt cotton row: Who stands to gain?

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The GEAC has deferred its decision on extending the approval period for three varieties of Mahyco's Bt cotton. But the season for sowing cotton in India begins in April and will continue till August.

On April 13, 2005 the Genetic Engineering Approval Committee (GEAC) deferred its decision on extending the approval period for three varieties of Mahyco's Bt cotton namely Mech-12 Bt, Mech-162 Bt and Mech-184 Bt, which ended on March 31, 2005. Even in its previous sitting on March 6, the GEAC failed to take a final decision on the matter. The next meeting of GEAC is scheduled on May 11. Meanwhile, the GEAC has sought reports from state governments about the performance of these three varieties.

The GEAC has taken this decision on account of adverse reports from the Andhra Pradesh government and also due to pressure from non-governmental organizations and environmental outfits. These varieties developed by Mahyco with imported technology from Monsanto received approval for commercial cultivation in six states - Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu, Gujarat and Madhya Pradesh. The GEAC gave its approval to Mahyco for a period of three years on March 29, 2002 after going through the results of the field trials conducted over a period of five years. As the approval period was for three years, it is now due for a review of the performance for subsequent extension of the approval or otherwise.

Since its launch in 2002, Mahyco Monsanto Biotech India Ltd (MMB), a marketing arm of the 50-50 joint venture between Mahyco and Monsanto Holdings Private Ltd, has sold about 72,000 packets of bollgard in 2002, 230,000 packets in 2003 and 13,00,000 packets in 2004 at Rs 1600 per packet. This indicates that the demand is growing for the use of Bt cotton in India. According to a market research by IMRB, this year the demand is expected to be approximately three times last year's actual sales.

Now many non-governmental organizations, farmers' associations and environmental organizations have been raising voice against Bt cotton citing environmental hazards. Their contention is that it is not lucrative for farmers and have demanded compensation from the seed company to farmers who suffered losses.

Contrary to the views of NGOs, the International Service for the Acquisition of Agri-Biotech Applications (ISAAA) in its 2004 report noted, "Bt cotton has the potential to reduce the requirements for cotton insecticides in India by half. It can also have a positive impact on the environment, economics of production and productivity and the health of up to 4 to 5 million small farmers growing cotton in India."

The sowing for cotton in the north India begins in April-May. In south and central India, sowing beginS during May-June and in Tamil Nadu, it will be done in August. In case GEAC fails to give its nod for Mahyco's Bt cotton hybrids on time, then the farmers who have already tasted the fruits of the new technology will buy Bt cotton seeds from Rasi Seeds, a sub-licensee of

MMB. "Besides Rasi Seeds, many seed companies have sub-licenses from MMB and are awaiting commercial approval for their own bollgard hybrids in this and subsequent years, "said Ranjana Smetacek, director, public affairs, Monsanto Holdings Pvt Ltd.

"Seeing the positive trend in the acceptance of Bt cotton, the seed companies concerned have planned stocks adequately so that the farmers get the seeds without any problems at fixed price of Rs 1600 per packet," Smetacek observed.

Nevertheless, the delay from the regulatory authority might encourage farmers to look at buying spurious/unauthenticated hybrid seeds from the grey market. The GEAC has already spent two months on the issue without arriving at a conclusion. This has only posed questions such as who would stand to gain in the tussle between GEAC and NGOs? Are pro-farmer organizations really concerned about the farmers' causes? Is this a lobby against the MNC/ new technology? Only time will tell.