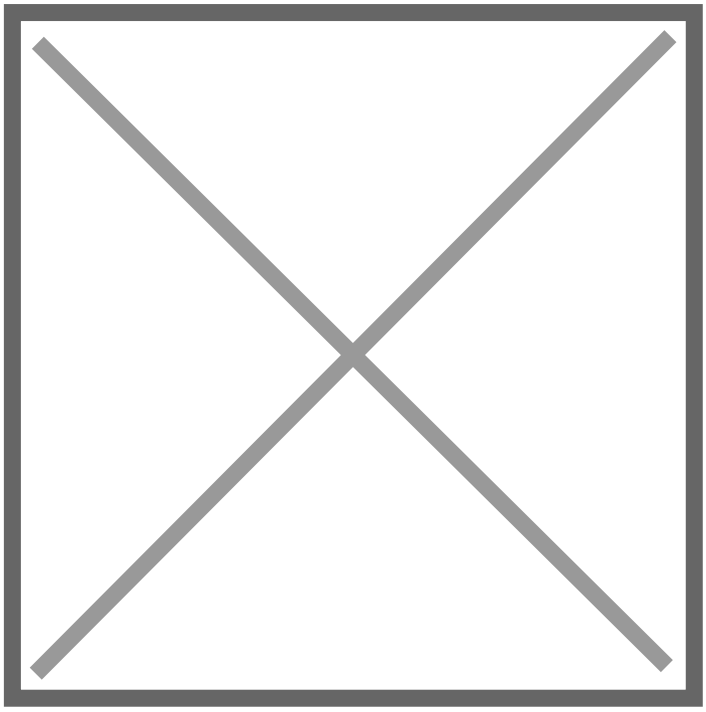
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Monsanto's Transgenic Cross

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Monsanto's Transgenic Cross



India's Supreme Court has put a temporary halt to the march of transgenic crops in the country. In an interim order while hearing a public interest litigation(PIL) in late September, the Court has asked the regulator to put on hold all future approvals of genetically modified (GM) products till it gives a final order.

The saving grace, however, has been that the Court has asked the regulator to continue the ongoing field trials of various GM products approved earlier. The strong anti-GM organizations which had filed the PIL are ecstatic that they got at least a partial victory. The BioAgri companies are disappointed but also happy that all existing approvals will stay till the final orders. The Court order has come as a surprise. Because in recent months India's top policy makers, including the Prime Minister, Minister for Agriculture, Minister for Science & Technology, have come out in full support of using more biotech in agriculture. And they have all highlighted the long list of GM products under development in private and public institutions in the country. Yet, a few committed anti-GM activists like Suman Sahai, Devinder Sharma, Vandana Shiva and Aruna Rodriguez and of course, Greenpeace, have dictated the agenda of the public discourse on GM products. Why has this happened? The BioAgri industry is yet to gather its wits on this issue and speak out collectively on this issue, even a week after the order. Barring a few agricultural scientists, the community of agriculture researchers have yet to come out in the public with their impartial views. Monsanto, whose subsidiary, Mahyco-Monsanto which is the principal player in the country's Bt cotton market too has not covered itself with glory. There is a strong feeling within the industry that Monsanto has preferred to let others bat for GM products and not come out fully to engage the public and opinion making sections of the Indian society. Monsanto has so far relied on the technological superiority of its products and refrained from carrying the various stakeholders of the industry with it.

According to BioSpectrum estimates, Monsanto may have earned about Rs 800 crore in technology license fee from its Bt cotton seeds since its commercial introduction in March 2002 to September 2006. However, when anti-GM activists claim that Monsanto has earned over Rs 4,000 crore from technology fee, which is just one-fifth of the actual amount, these allegations strike a chord in the public and remains unchallenged.

The industry has come together to discuss many such issues confronting it, during the BioSpectrum CEO Summit series in August-September. Dr M K Bhan, Dr R A Mashelkar and Dr Cyrus Poonwalla, ably assisted by Dr Rashmi Barbhaiya, Mr Nitin Deshmukh and Mr Hari Bhartia, helped the industry leaders to focus on the tasks ahead. Attended by nearly 200 industry

leaders in Bangalore, Mumbai and New Delhi, the BioSpectrum event has prepared the blueprint for the next phase of the growth of the industry. There is a role for every one to play- government, biotech industry, researchers and students- agreed the CEOs. It's not that the industry and the government do not know what the issues are, but the challenge is taking the process of dialogue further forward. Though several things have changed in the past few years, the process of change is not commensurate with the changing dynamics of the industry. It is time for some radical thinking and action to bring about the desired changes in a much lesser time frame, for a more meaningful purpose and with a greater share of accountability.

The snapshots of the discussions and suggestions are available in the following pages in an easy-to-read format. Many of the participants wanted the dialogue to continue on some other segments too. BioSpectrum would continue these efforts and of course, looks forward to generous support from the industry to make these happen more frequently.

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