

Indian consumers are ready for biotech food: AFIC

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Bt brinjal is soon going to be India's first biotech food crop, and while there are opinions both for and against it, a study postulates that consumers in India are ready to embrace biotech foods...

Consumers in Asia, particularly India, China and Philippines, are ready to accept the benefits from biotechnology-derived foods, according to a consumer survey conducted by the Asian Food Information Centre (AFIC), a trusted, science-based resource on nutrition, health and food safety for the Asian region. Currently biotechnology research is being done on a wide variety of food crops in India that include banana, cabbage, castor, cauliflower, corn, groundnut, mustard, okra, onion, papaya, potato, rice and tomato which might see the light of the day in a few years from now.

The survey titled "Consumer Perception on Acceptance of Biotech Food in Asia" was conducted by the Nielsen Company across five Asian countries including China, India, Japan, Philippines and South Korea. The survey provides consumers insights on their perceptions of biotechnology to produce foods, and assesses their acceptance of the benefits of biotechnology-derived foods in the Asian region. The survey was divided into three parts, which include consumer attitudes towards food safety and food labeling; consumer awareness and attitudes towards food biotechnology; and consumer attitudes towards direct consumer benefits of food biotechnology.

Commenting on the findings of the survey, Dr George Fuller, executive director, Asian Food Information Centre (AFIC) said, "We found a relatively high level of acceptance of biotechnology and anticipation of its benefits in India. Not only this, there was an overwhelming support (94 percent) for the use of biotechnology for sustainable food production. Also consumers were less concerned about labeling in biotech products."

According to the results 84 percent of Indian consumers are ready to purchase biotech food such as tastier tomato, cheaper food staples, and foods/cooking oil with healthier fat profile. Indian consumers were also found to be the most confident with food safety levels in the country, vis-à-vis their Asian counterparts. Reducing the amount of pesticides needed to produce food was the most important concern of Asian consumers followed by increasing the production of food staples in the world,

thereby reducing world hunger. Pesticide residues were also the topmost food safety concern followed by food poisoning, food from unknown source and improper handling of food.

"It is encouraging to note that 84 percent of Indians are ready to purchase biotech food to experience its benefits and are the most confident with the food safety levels in the country, vis-à-vis Asian counterparts. This is good news for India, as the Government considers crop biotechnology as a strategic element to increase productivity of food.

Within the limitations of our survey that was restricted to urban population in each of the countries in the Asia Pacific, we found that there was a high level of awareness on biotechnology. Philippines had the highest level of awareness level owing to its long association with biotech crops. In surveys done earlier, the awareness level has been low, but over the last 5 years, we have seen a definite increase," Dr Fuller added.

China also came quite close in the survey. About 94 percent of Chinese consumers supported plant biotechnology related to sustainable food production followed by the Philippines, Korea and Japan. When asked about the product preference, 82 percent of Chinese consumers favored nutritionally enhanced soy products, while 98 percent of the Philippines preferred rice, and healthier cooking oil with reduced saturated and trans fats. Korean consumers favored cooking oil and foods with a healthier oil profile; while in Japan, freshness and taste are the most preferred benefits. When asked if GM crops could help us achieve the Millennium Development Goal, Dr Fuller said, "GM crops are an important part of the answer but not by itself, we need to use other tools in our arsenal such as integrated pest management, water management to achieve food security."

Shalini Gupta