

The curious case of Bt brinjal

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The New Year has not started well at least for the BioAgri industry. Prime Minister Dr Manmohan Singh set the ball rolling with his comments calling for a cautious approach to the approval process for genetically modified (GM) food products, even as he highlighted the Bt cotton success story. He made these remarks while inaugurating the 97th Indian Science Congress session, the annual gathering of scientists, at Thiruvananthapuram on January 3.

“The technology of genetic modification is also being extended to food crops though this raises legitimate questions of safety. These must be given full weightage, with appropriate regulatory control based on strictly scientific criteria,” remarked the PM. And this remark has in fact set in motion a chain of events that may eventually lead to an unexpected decision on Bt brinjal.

An open and shut case of regulatory approval for the first GM food product in the country has got caught in a major political and public controversy. The regulatory agency, the Genetic Engineering Approval Committee (GEAC) in the Ministry of Environment and Forests (MoEF) is the final authority to approve the introduction of a GM food crop in the country. The government has not taken any anti-GM policy decision so far.

GEAC is empowered by law to clear commercial use of any GM product. All pharma products, approved by GEAC, go to the Drug Controller General of India for final decision. In the case of agricultural products, GEAC’s decision is final. Usually, after the minutes of a meeting is approved, the decision is conveyed to the applicant about the approval or rejection of a transgenic event. In this case, GEAC had approved the transgenic event used by Bt brinjal by Mahyco on October 14, 2009. However, the Environment Minister Jairam Ramesh has taken upon himself the role of a “super regulator” to have the final say on the Bt brinjal approval. In fact, Ramesh has publicly stated that he will gather public opinion on Bt brinjal through a

nationwide consultation process and present the views with his inputs to the Prime Minister in February for the final call.

This is indeed a very curious regulatory process. Usually regulators are empowered with legal and technical inputs to take the final call. Here the anti-GM activists have been able to drum up support against the October 14 decision of GEAC based on two points: One, GEAC is not a representative organization and hence anti-GM views should be heard. Two, a transgenic food crop such as brinjal is different from GM pharma products and hence wider consultations are required.

It is the “unrepresentative” composition of GEAC that has given both the minister and anti-GM activists the leeway to enlarge the scope of the Bt brinjal approval process. The GEAC is made up of 31 members. Of them, 10 are bureaucrats and 19 are scientists —both serving and retired ones, drawn from various government-funded laboratories. There is one legal expert and the last one is an economist. So, there is definitely a case to rework GEAC’s composition to make it more representative especially since it is going to decide the approval of a dozen more GM food products in the near future. The proposed government plan to introduce a new regulatory system for biotech has more or less been consigned to the freezer. More consumer representatives and eminent scientists not linked to either the government or industry should be inducted into the regulatory agency.

Based on the inputs gathered during the public consultative process, it will be difficult for the government to approve commercial cultivation of Bt brinjal in the near future.

Stung by the midnight December decision on the creation of Telengana issue, Manmohan Singh government is most likely to play it safe and put the Bt brinjal approval process in the freezer for a few more years. If this happens, the interim period should be used to set up credible, independent testing systems for all GM products so that the regulator’s words will carry conviction with citizens, at least the next time around.

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