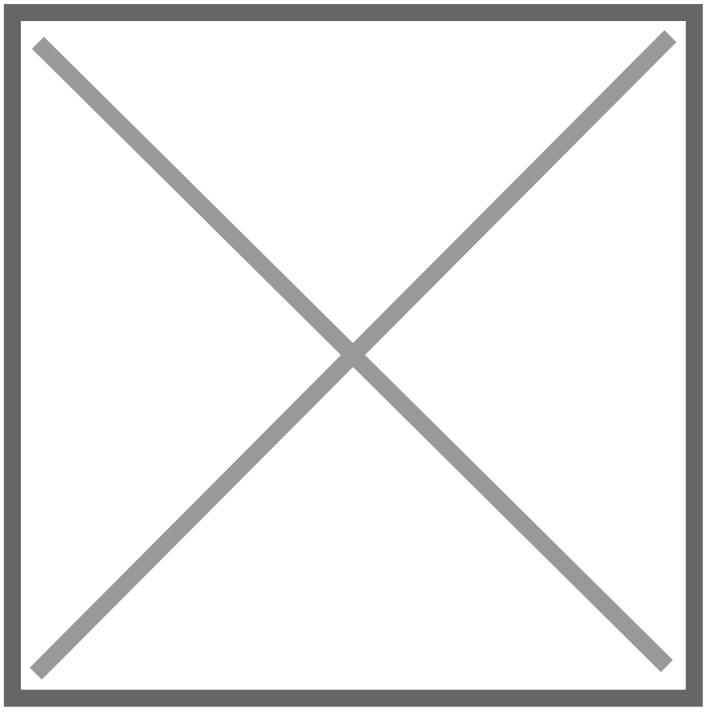
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Ã¢â?¬Å?Needless ConfusionÃ¢â?¬?

09 January 2009 | News



“Needless Confusion”

*The anti-GM crops statement by the Union Health Minister, Dr Anbumani Ramadoss has already created ripples in biotech sector. Dr KK Narayanan, CEO, Metahelix, President ABLE, Bangalore, registers his opinion on the outcome of Dr Ramadoss’s statement.*

One sector in our country that is least likely to be affected by the global economic meltdown is agriculture. In the last 15 years, this sector was almost stagnating when other sectors like ser vices and manufacturing were clocking almost double digit growth. The latest economic survey has indicated that the annual growth in food grain production in the country between 1990 and 2007 was a mere 1.2 percent, while the annual growth in population was 1.9 percent, during the same period. We all know that a major food crisis in the country was averted only because of the import of wheat and other grains in the recent past. Thankfully, the growth in non-agricultural sectors had put enough money in the government’s coffers to pay for these purchases. However, this situation cannot continue for long, especially when depressed global demand has been putting a severe pressure on the services and manufacturing-led economic growth of our country.

Even before the impact of financial crisis was felt here, there was a growing realization that there is a need to spur agricultural growth in order to achieve all-round economic development and welfare of our people. To achieve this end, Indian agriculture has to break out of the shackles of old and outdated technology. In recent years there have been some signs of this happening. The adoption of the genetically modified (GM) Bt-cotton for large-scale cultivation in the country in 2002, after extensive testing, is a pointer to this fact. Since then the country has seen almost a revolution in cotton production; this was probably the only crop whose production bucked the general trend and grew at over 20 percent year after year.

The total cotton production in India in 2002 was 1.4 million bales (of 170 kg) which in 2007 had grown to 3.1 million bales. The area under this crop had remained almost unchanged at about 8.5 million hectares; it was the increase in productivity, from a dismal 275 kg per hectares to over 500 kg per hectares, which was responsible for this spurt in production. From being a net importer of cotton till 2003, India is today a net exporter of cotton. And now, we can claim to be ahead of even the United States in cotton production! While all this has happened, the people who have benefited the most have been the Indian cotton farmers as testified by the very high adoption rates for this technology.

Today, over 90 percent of the area under hybrid cotton, which accounts to over 70 percent of the total cotton area and over 85 percent of the total cotton production, is dominated by Bt-cotton, which shows the dramatic success of Bt-cotton. It is therefore quite baffling when the Union Health Minister, Anbumani Ramdoss publicly states that he is opposed to GM crops. Such an expressed view, especially taken by a minister who is a qualified medical doctor, cannot be dismissed as one, borne out of ignorance. Surely, the minister must be pandering to some interested groups or it could be a calculated move to make some political capital, with the next general elections coming in a few months. If the objective is the latter, such a stand is unlikely to

yield any political dividends.

Farmers form the largest voting sections, if grouped by one's profession, in our country, and no political party can afford to ignore their interests. The last few state elections, particularly in those states that have significant areas under cotton like Punjab, Gujarat and Madhya Pradesh, have seen political parties and their leaders vying with each other in claiming credit for promoting Bt-cotton. In Punjab, the competing parties even paid for newspaper space to assert this claim. Having savored the benefits of technological products like Bt-cotton in the last few years, it is difficult to understand how the farmers of this country could be persuaded to vote for someone or a party, which opposes the introduction of such technologies. Unless, interest in one's own welfare gets subsumed by other considerations such as caste, religion and community.

The political base of the health minister and his party is limited to Tamil Nadu, where there is increasing cultivation of Bt-cotton. It is notable that the specific districts where the minister's party has significant following are important areas of Bt-cotton seed production, with thousands of farmers engaged in this activity. The minister is no political novice and in all likelihood, all these considerations would have been factored in, before the public posturing. There is however, no certainty in foretelling how this stand would impact the electoral fortunes of the minister and his party in the coming elections.

The political fall-out of an "anti-GM crops" stand could be uncertain, but what is almost certain is the adverse impact it will have on the development and promotion of such technologies, which promise to bring enormous benefits to Indian farmers and to the sector as a whole. While the Government of India has been promoting the development and responsible use of GM technologies in agriculture through policy initiatives and large public investments, such statements, that too by the head of an important ministry, induces a sense of ambivalence.

In earlier occasions when statements like this, which have gone against the government's stated position, have been made by individual functionaries of the same government, other responsible persons have been quick in their rebuttal, in some instances by outright condemnation, but in most instances by conveniently terming them as "individual opinions" and thereby disowning these views as that of the government's. However, in this case this has not yet happened. These circumstances are bound to make the institutions, especially in the private sector, wary of making further investments in developing and commercializing new GM technologies and this could have long-term implications for Indian agriculture.

Though one would have expected the regulatory system for GM crops to have been streamlined, with less uncertainty and time-bound approval process, particularly in wake of the Bt-cotton experience, the exact opposite is what has happened. Under the ruse of reacting to some of the recent court rulings and the turf wars between the various ministries, the regulatory process, particularly for GM crops has become more tortuous and uncertain.

Modifications or additions are being proposed by overzealous officials in the regulatory package, more driven by sentiments rather than any consideration for scientific logic or relevance. While this is the state of affairs, it must be said on all fairness, that there are serious efforts underway to bring in some order to the system based on science and practical need. But these efforts are taking time, more so with the divergent views and interests of the various stakeholders within and outside the regulatory regime.

The statement by the minister and the confusion it has already generated, would only add to the predicament of those engaged in reforming the regulatory system. Uncertainty and needless delays will continue in approving new technologies that could put Indian agriculture on a fast-track of growth. There are several such technologies that are sitting on the shelves without reaching our farmers because of regulatory delays.

Highlights

The Union Health Minister, Anbumani Ramdoss's public statement opposing GM crops, cannot be dismissed as one, borne out of ignorance.

The minister must be pandering to some interested groups or it could be a calculated move to make some political capital, with the next general elections coming in a few months.

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