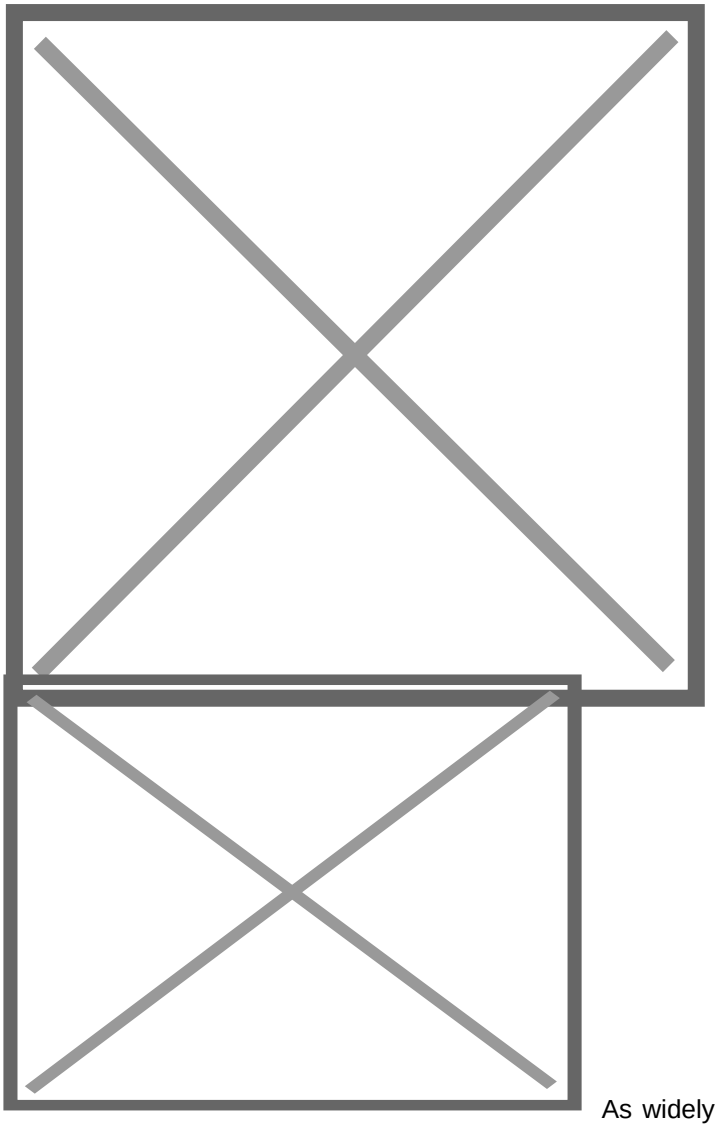
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Bt brinjal put on hold for now

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As widely expected, the government has imposed a moratorium on the introduction of India's first genetically modified (GM) food crop, a Bt brinjal hybrid, developed by Maharashtra Hybrid Seed Company(Mahyco). Environment Minister, Jairam Ramesh, made the public announcement about the move to put on hold the commercial approval granted to Mahyco's Bt brinjal hybrid, using a cry1Ac gene extracted from a soil bacterium, bacillus thuringiensis, to induce resistance to a major pest, foot and stem borer which damages more than 40 of the crop by its attacks.

This decision on moratorium, after the pathbreaking approval granted to it by the biotech regulator, the Genetic Engineering Approval Committee (GEAC), on October 14, 2009, has sent shock waves through the industry and jubilation among the anti-GM coalition of civil society groups.

While announcing his decision on February 9, 2010, Jairam Ramesh said, Ã¢â?¬Å?It is my duty to adopt a precautionary principle-based approach and impose a moratorium on the release of Bt brinjal till such time independent scientific studies establish to the satisfaction of both the public and professionals the safety of the product from the point of view of its long-term impact on human health and environment.Ã¢â?¬?

It has been clarified that the current moratorium is only on this specific Bt brinjal hybrid and not on the GM food technology itself. Ongoing trials and research work on various GM crops could continue, the minister clarified.

The minister faced strong opposition from his Cabinet colleagues handling science and technology, agriculture and other senior members. So the Prime Minister, Dr Manmohan Singh was forced to intervene and convene a meeting of these warring ministers and nudge them towards a consensus. This important meeting was held on February 24, 2010.

The meeting could not resolve the issue amicably. However, it gave a lease of life to the long pending legislation to set up the National Biotechnology Regulatory Authority (NBRA).

A statement issued by the Prime Minister's Office (PMO) after the February 24 meeting said: Ã¢â?¬Å?It was agreed that biotechnology is an important option for higher agricultural productivity and ensuring food security. At the same time, we must ensure that it has no adverse effects on human and animal health and bio-diversity.Ã¢â?¬?

Ã¢â?¬Å?Keeping this in mind, the government will soon be moving forward in setting up a National Biotechnology Regulatory Authority, which will inspire confidence and stimulate public and private investment in biotechnology,Ã¢â?¬? the PMO statement said.

The meeting came after the issue on Bt brinjal moratorium was raised by the Agriculture Minister, Sharad Pawar who had written to the Prime Minister, earlier this month. Pawar had written that moratorium had 'confused' the scientific community and the private sector about the status of biotechnology in food security and about the deciding authority.

The statement issued by PMO also clarified that the Genetic Engineering Approval Committee (GEAC), would continue to remain as the body to address concerns for resolving all scientific issues relating to Bt brinjal including safety aspects. The meeting also stressed the need to create confidence amongst states about the role of biotechnology in food security.

The proposal to set up NBRA was mooted in 2004 based on the reports of two task forces on biopharma (headed by Dr RA Mashelkar) and bioagriculture (Dr MS Swaminathan). However, the draft legislation has been circulating within the government for over five years due to lack of consensus between the various ministries and regulators involved in handling biotechnology.

Now, with the Prime Minister's public statements, the NBRA bill is likely to get a smoother passage within the government. In early February, the NBRA bill was referred by the Cabinet Secretary to a committee of secretaries (COS) for the final word. According to Dr MK Bhan, secretary, Department of Biotechnology, the draft bill will be ready to be sent to the Cabinet for approval. The long wait for NBRA bill could finally be over.

Experts speak...
Ã¢â?¬Å?The real losers are not just scientists who were responsibly for developing technology for the last many years, but actually farmers who could have enormously benefited from this technology. The Environment Minister has given himself to sentiments rather than science and scientific logicÃ¢â?¬?
- KK Narayanan, managing director, Metahelix Life Sciences

Ã¢â?¬Å?I wanted a moratorium on all GM crops for the next 5-8 years till the time there is reliable scientific data from the Indian scientific community Ã¢â?¬â?? so that has happened. Now a network of indigenous labs should be set up where the technology should be tested on our home conditionsÃ¢â?¬?
- Dr PM Bhargava, independent observer appointed by the Supreme Court to the GEAC

Ã¢â?¬Å?We need a regulatory mechanism that inspires data confidence. There are concerns about whether all tests have been done, and whether there has been an independent verification of results submitted by a company. In food items of life-long consumption, chronic toxicity tests should be conducted on animals. There is need for a regulatory body with independent facilities for testingÃ¢â?¬?
- Dr MS Swaminathan, eminent agriculture scientist

Ã¢â?¬Å?We are not against the use of genetically modified technology to improve crop yields. But we oppose the introduction of Bt brinjalÃ¢â?¬?
- Sunita Narain, director, Center for Science and Environment

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