

India rejects USAID's GM food aid

11 April 2003 | News



On 6 March 2003, after four-hour long meeting, the GEAC ruled out the possibility of import of GM corn-soya blend into India. The purpose of the meeting was to discuss the request of the two international NGOs operating in India, Co-operation for American Relief Everywhere (CARE) and Catholic Relief Services (CRS) for allowing them to import GM corn-soya blend from US for distribution amongst school children and the poor. The agencies were asked to get the consignments certified from the exporters that it does not contain any traces of Starlink Corn, a variety of corn banned for human consumption or any hazardous GM products, which they failed to oblige.

The agencies had applied in June 2002 for permission to import a total of 23,000 tons of corn-soya blend. The CARE-India proposed to import 15,000 tons of GM corn-soya blend and the CRS about 8,000 tons from the US Agency for International Development (USAID), which gives food to these agencies free of cost. Pending, the decision of the GEAC, both the CRS and CARE-India booked a consignment of 1,000 tons. But this consignment could not land at the Indian shore as the GEAC finally rejected the plea for such imports in November 2002.

Aggrieved at the GEAC's decision, the agencies appealed before the one-man Appellate Authority that had fixed the date for hearing on 18 February. But before the actual hearing could take place both the CARE-India and the CRS withdrew their petitions. The GEAC was afraid that the said food aid from US might contain traces of the hazardous Starlink Corn, which is not yet approved for human consumption by the United States Food and Drug Administration. When the GEAC came out with a decision there were reports of traces of Starlink Corn slipping into US consignments to Japan, South Korea and Australia.

Wait and watch

Apparently, the GEAC does not want to take the risk of approving the import of GM foods aid from US and create problems in the country. According to reports, the GEAC does not have the expertise or the manpower to deal with checking, verifying, certifying, monitoring health impacts, labeling, even analyzing the impact on trade and other international agreements.

In this case the USAID food aid was meant for people already vulnerable and there was no mechanism for post-aid disbursement surveillance. The government officials are of the opinion that why should we rush in?" when even approving a single consignment of food aid, or a crop like mustard which is wholly edible, would be viewed as a green signal for GM food and set a precedent of sorts.

Need for transparent policy

The Green Peace activists' recent seizure of the Monsanto R&D center in Bangalore shows that still people are opposing the GEAC's approval of GM cotton a year ago. What worries them is a new policy adopted by GEAC that it would consider imports of GM foods on a case-by-case basis rather than stick to its original blanket ban. The activists claim that the results of the commercial planting of GM cotton are not positive as the farmers in many states suffered massive losses.

Before any more approvals on GM food, the government should announce a clear policy on GM foods. Even if it is a case-by-case policy, what are the issues, which need to be looked at each time, and what are the mechanisms, which need to be set in place? India's present laws on the import of GM food items are strict, but implementation has been poor, especially after the lifting of import regulations.

Apart from this, the union environment ministry is also working on to make the decision-making process in GM food more transparent to educate people and meet the demand of activists that data on GM crops or food be made public. It's just at a thinking on the right path as officials are wondering as to how to go about this and what kind of data to make available on the web, for instance. The efforts should be speeded up to have a clear and transparent policy on GM food.

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