

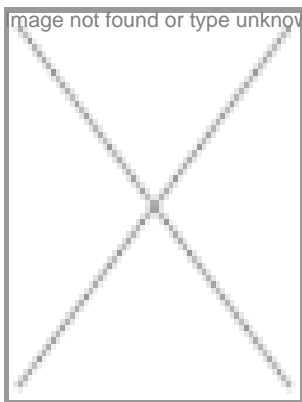
Bt brinjal needs help

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The issue related to the commercial release of the country's first genetically-modified(GM) food product, a Bt brinjal variety, is becoming more and more curious by the day. Exactly a year ago, in October 2009, the nation's apex biotech regulator, the Genetic Engineering Approval Committee (GEAC) gave its seal of approval to the Bt brinjal developed by Mahyco, after evaluating results of reports of an expert committee.

In the normal course, the decision of GEAC would have been just notified along with other decisions taken at the monthly meeting of the regulator. However, the script did not take place in the conventional way. The Minister for Environment Jairam Ramesh, under whose Ministry the GEAC is constituted, did not approve the GEAC decision, citing policy issues. And then, he went on a nationwide public consultation process and in February 2010; announced a moratorium on Bt expert views are factored in.

This decision itself was a strange one. Existing public policy supports the use of GM products in the country. The National Biotech Policy of 2008 has called for the use GM technologies in crops, and did not exclude GM food products from its purview. The Minister's decision was approved by Prime Minister Manmohan Singh in a late- February meeting, added to the confusion.

Now a year later, things are still hazy over the issues. The Environment Ministry wanted to consult more views. In September 2010, six leading science academies in the country have expressed their expert opinion on GM products, and Bt brinjal in particular. "The overwhelming view is that the available evidence has shown, adequately and beyond reasonable doubt, that Bt brinjal is safe for human consumption, and that its environmental effects are negligible," observed the report by the

academies.

The report has categorically stated that “the limited release Bt brinjal need not wait for the establishment of Biotechnology Regulatory Authority of India (BRAI).” The academies have, however, suggested the setting up of a panel of independent experts to monitor the performance of Bt brinjal, till the new regulatory agency, BRAI, is set up.

These six academies are headed by some of the most eminent scientists in the country, and are elected by their peers regularly. Usually, the government relies on expert advice and in scientific matters, it has always gone by the advice of experts in the last 63 years. Rarely has the government rejected the reports of scientific experts.

However, Environment Minister Ramesh has a different view. Within days of the release of the report, he simply debunked it, stating the science academies have based their report on limited data.

This is an inappropriate response by the Minister to an important issue that has bearing on the nation’s food security, as well as consumer choice. Scientists have said Bt brinjal is safe to consume. The views of consumers have not been taken into account in this entire debate. So far the opposition to Bt brinjal has come mainly from civil society groups and some farmers.

The government should not wait any longer to allow commercial cultivation of Bt brinjal. If farmers see a value in it, they will plump for it. This is what happened in the case of Bt cotton. And consumers will reject Bt brinjal, if they do not find it good. The government should act in the best interests of consumers who should be given the widest choice in food items. The dilatory tactics adopted by the government in case of Bt brinjal in the face of overwhelming scientific evidence in its favor, raises doubts about the decision making process, over an issue which has wide public interest.

The science academies have called for limited release of Bt brinjal. The voices and reasoning of the country’s best scientific minds should be heeded to, without any further delay.

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