

Finally GEAC nod to few key GM crop field trials

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In a major relief to the agri-biotech industry that has been running pillar to post for putting its case before the government and regulators, the Genetic Engineering Appraisal Committee (GEAC) has cleared field trials of GM rice, wheat, maize and castor for the upcoming Kharif season. However at the same time, the clearances for another 53 field trials are still pending with the regulatory body.

The clearance includes extension of permits, due to expire in states opposed to the field trials or wanting a relocation of their sites, Bayer Bioscience has got open-ended clearance to test GM rice in all four regions of the country. The open-ended clearance allows the tests but only in consenting states: that is, no company can conduct these trials without the approval of state governments. In light of this ruling, biotech companies are expected to move their trial sites to 'willing' states. Mayhco and BASF India Limited too have got the GEAC nod for trials of GM rice.

The Hyderabad-based Directorate of Oilseeds Research's GM castor too has been re-approved for field trials reviving a permit that had lapsed owing to lack of approval from the Andhra Pradesh government.

Monsanto India Limited has been allowed to test its GM maize at alternate sites after it ran into opposition in many of the states, which had been earlier cleared by the Union government for its trials.

Mayhco has on the other hand been given an extended clearance for its trials of GM wheat after the company had failed to get the green light from the state government. Besides these food crops, the GEAC has also given the nod for further field testing of various GM cotton varieties by Bayer, BASF and Mayhco.

These clearances have come ahead of the Supreme Court judgment on a petition challenging the existing regulatory mechanism for GM crops in the country. The next hearing of the case is supposed to on July 1, 2013 where all the concerned stakeholders including the Association of Biotechnology led Enterprises (ABLE)- Agriculture Group (AG), activists, government and others are expected to make strong arguments for their point of views. At the same time, the Biotechnology Regulatory Authority of India (BRAI) bill is pending with parliamentary standing committee and it doesn't seem to be an easy affair to pass it in near future.