

Spurious Bt cottonseeds - Is it the right way?

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The use of spurious/fake things has become a part of everyday life in India. In anything that we buy, electronic goods, drugs, pesticides, fertilizers, healthcare products, we find bogus products. Now it is time for bogus seeds

Some of the seed companies in Gujarat have been involved in selling spurious Bt cotton seeds at a much lower price against the Mahyco's Monsanto's Bollgard. Till date only Mahyco's Monsanto Biotech Ltd (MMB) has the official approval for the commercial production of Bt cotton from the Genetic Engineering Approval Committee (GEAC) of the Ministry of Environment and Forestry (MoEF). Reports say that the farmers in Gujarat are earning big profits by using spurious seeds.

The farmers are using hybrid Bt cotton seeds sold under brand names like Rakshak F-1, Captain F-1 Hybrid Cotton Seeds, Research Hybrid cotton F-1 (Tilak), Trishul (F1), Kavach F-1, hybrid Kapas-151, Suraksha-hybrid cotton seeds, Research hybrid cotton F-1, Krushi-357, Sarathi. These are sold at a lesser price than Bollgard (Rs 1600 per packet), which is marketed by MMB. Ahmedabad-based Navbharat Seeds owned by Dr DB Desai, a former minister of Maharashtra, is also selling hybrid seeds containing the same Cry1AC gene, incorporated in Bollgard, even when GEAC had approved to MMB to evaluate the performance of Bt cotton for a period of three years starting from 2002.

The Central Institute Cotton Research (CICR), Nagpur has carried out PCR and ELISA tests on these cotton seeds and confirmed that the above brands have tested positive for the presence of Cry 1 gene. The above hybrids have not been approved by the GEAC and therefore production/sale of the above hybrids is a clear violation of the rules of 1980 and liable for punitive action under the Environment (Protection) Act 1986.

MMB had filed a complaint with the Government of India against the sale of spurious Bt cotton last year. Accordingly the MoEF has asked the Gujarat government to take appropriate steps to curb the sales of spurious Bt cotton seeds in the state. But the state government has failed to take steps against the companies. It is an irony that on the other side, Department of Science and Technology (DST) and Gujarat government are promoting biotechnology in a big way by organizing programs, seminars and exhibitions showcasing the strengths of Gujarat. When BioSpec-trum contacted Rajesh Kishore, secretary, DST for his comments on the issue, he informed, "it is not appropriate for me to say anything at this moment. I am waiting for the information from agriculture department, which is planning to organize a conference on agribio-technology this November, after the success of pharma-biotech event held on September 29."

Good rains, more acreage

According to Vishwa Nath, chairman and managing director, Cotton Corporation of India, Indian cotton cultivation during the 2003-04 season (October-September) is expected to increase by 12 percent, to around 85 lakh hectares. This is mainly due to the good and favorable monsoon during the initial two months and the farmers are reported to have bought more certified seeds as compared to previous year. Area under Bt cotton has also increased to around 1.25 lakh hectares compared to 40,000 hectares in the previous season. As against the last year's sale of about 72,000 packets, MMB was able to sell over 2,00,000 packets this season. In Gujarat alone, the company has sold over 1,00,000 packets this season. However industry sources say that there is a large quantity of illegal Bt cotton available in Gujarat, but there are no figures available for these illegal plantings.

Ranjana Smetacek, director (corporate affairs), Monsanto India said, "Any spurious product brings a bad name to the genuine product. Clearly, any negatives from illegal Bt cotton would lend a bad name to the technology and therefore damage our interests and those of other seed companies working within the regulatory system to market Bt cotton seeds."

C Kameswara Rao, founder, Foundation for Biotechnology Awareness and Education, Bangalore, said that the unauthorized cultivation of Bt cotton in Gujarat is bad for the future of GM crops in the country on at least three counts. First, it will encourage similar misadventure in other parts of the country. Second, it gives a new whip for the NGOs to ridicule the regulatory measures and GM crops and lastly it will further delay the introduction of other GM crops in India by generating fresh controversies.

Ironically it is Monsanto's technology that is encouraging companies to produce and sell fake hybrid seeds as the technology is not patent-protected. There are a number of co-licensees with whom MMB has signed agreements and they are all working within the regulatory system to introduce Monsanto's Bt gene into their hybrids. Spurious seed sale may result in poor investments in R&D from the private participants who really want to sell quality seeds.

According to reports, companies like Nath seeds, Ankur seeds, Ajeet seeds, Krishidam, Mahendra and Nuziveedu seeds are already working on Bt cotton trials and are expected to release their products by 2006. If the state governments fail to take action against the sale of spurious Bt cotton, the scientists working on such projects may be demoralized of taking up research work.

Then what next....

The companies, which are doing research should take up the initiative to bring in awareness about spurious Bt seeds by organizing one to one farmer meeting, group farmer meetings etc. Even the state governments should actively participate in promoting the technology by initiating stringent steps against the lawbreakers. MMB is already working in this regard by conducting field days where in its field staff visits the villages at the time of crop harvesting, sending mailers, print materials like posters, banners, etc. to farmers. In the past, MMB and the government have put out messages for farmers, warning them against the products of spurious seed sellers.

Narayan Kulkarni