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"Bt cotton will continue to be in great demand"

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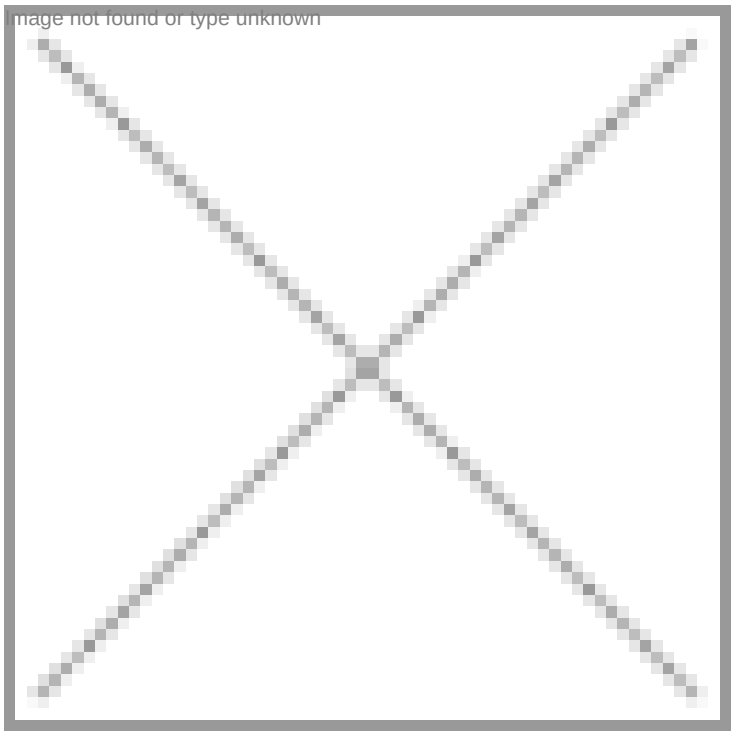

"Bt cotton will continue to be in great demand"

- M Ramasami, MD, Rasi Seeds

When did you launch Bt cottonseeds in India?
And why and when did you enter the Bt cotton area?

We launched Bt cottonseeds in India in 2004. RCH 2 Bt is our first Bt cotton hybrid.

I decided to enter the area of transgenic Bt cotton during 1997 after I realized that it is beneficial to the Indian farmers in view of reduced pesticide use and ensured yield by way of good protection from cotton bollworm attack. I was confident that environmental pollution could be substantially reduced since cotton is a crop that consumes maximum percentage of pesticides used for agricultural crops.

What were the challenges you faced during the launch of the Bt cottonseeds in India? And under which brand name (product name) do you market Bt cottonseeds in India?

When it was first introduced, there were mixed feelings among the farmers, as the technology is new to India. Further, there were many apprehensions. We had to do a lot of field demonstrations in all the cotton-growing regions of India to instill

confidence among the farmers on the benefits of this wonderful technology. Our first Bt cotton hybrid was RCH 2 Bt. Currently we have 14 Bt cotton hybrids approved by the Government of India for commercial cultivation.

What is your current reach and how has the sales been?

We have reached 30 percent share on the total sale of Bt cotton during 2006 and our sale is 27 lakh packets of 450 grams each.

Which technology do you use? Are you looking at other technologies?

We have been using the Bollgard technology developed by Monsanto.

Currently I'm taking the initiative to outsource technologies, especially for drought, improving fertilizer use efficiency for viruses like yellow vein mosaic in bhendi, leaf curl virus in cotton and tomato etc. from promising technology providers around the world.

What were the initiatives you took to promote Bt cottonseeds among the farming community across the country during the initial period of launch?

To promote the efficacy and usefulness of Bt technology for cotton, during the initial period, we conducted the following:

- 450 field demonstrations during 2003 in six states
- 640 trials in 2004 in nine states
- 740 field visit programs for farmers (2002-03)
- 6000 in-field training programs with 2.7 lakhs farmers during 2004
- 866 field visit programs for farmers with Bt and non-Bt hybrids
- 92,700 farmers visited the fields of Bt cotton hybrids In addition, to popularize the benefits we did the following:
- Press advertisement
- Contacts with scientists/government officials/ NGOs/media
- Demonstration boards in all demo sites
- Pest boards â€“ to create awareness on the different pests that attack cotton crop
- Hand bills â€“ with details of the product and its package of practices (in the vernacular language)
- Cards showing the cotton cultivation practices
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Pocket cards were given on the salient launch of the program

- Training on the right use of this technology
- Press/TV coverage of these events and media van campaign.

What are the current promotional activities? Have farmers accepted Bt cotton? And what are the challenges now?

We continue to work with the farmers in addition to distribution and supply of Bt cotton hybrid seeds. Our dedicated staffers visit farmers across India right from Tamil Nadu to Punjab and advice the farmers regarding the maintenance of the cotton crop and thus benefit them to the fullest.

The farmers are convinced about the benefits of Bt cotton technology and are willing to grow Bt cotton continuously. Now the challenge to us is to prove how Rasi cotton hybrids with Bt technology is superior. We had to create better high-yielding germplasm continuously to keep the superiority and maximum coverage of Rasi Bt hybrids.

What are the measures taken by your company regarding the availability of legal seeds and to put a check on illegal sale of spurious Bt cottonseeds in the market?

We are continuously creating communication to farmers about the benefits of Bt technology under superior germplasm background. We strongly believe that the menace of illegal seeds can be contained only by: Instilling confidence on the quality of seed and adequate supply at reasonable price; And making the farmers to realize that only legal seed suppliers are accountable and reliable.

The issue of pricing has brought most of the state governments under one umbrella to take on the corporate. What are your views on the same?

The state governments are concerned about the distress of farmers. The perception on cost of seed as the main cause for farmers' distress is superficial. The state governments have realized that the distress of the farmers should be addressed quickly. Joining together and restricting the prices to the extent of damaging the health of the seed industry is the problem.

The seed industry in India is comparatively of very recent origin. Except a few companies, most seed companies are small players. They do not have the strength to face heavy odds. The implementation of various laws on seed regulation is in the hands of state governments.

All the biotechnology inventions have to be carried through seed only. The seed companies have to invest very heavily on R&D, create good infrastructure, hire a lot of technical manpower. Once this happens, the future of agriculture will be stable.

There should not be any interference in the pricing decision. The market forces should be allowed to work. Only then better competition will prevail leading to better products for the benefit of farmers. The current trends definitely block the development of the seed industry and stymie flow of newer technologies continuously.

How do you see the future for Bt cottonseeds in India and other Bt food and feed crops?

Bt cotton will continue to be in great demand in view of the substantial benefits realized by the farmers. The efforts on increasing food production by conventional breeding has reached a plateau and to meet the growing demand for food, production efforts has to go up. The quick possible way is to reduce the loss due to insect pests. I am confident Bt food crops will help us to meet this challenge. I have no idea on the feed crops.

Do you see price war in this space with more agri firms (with different technologies) entering the Bt cotton space?

Prices are decided by the value the consumer gets out of the technology. Better technology, germplasm and high net return will always fetch higher price.

What are the reasons for the mixed reactions on the Bt cottonseeds in the last five years in India?

Lack of understanding about the role of technology, high expectation on the farmers' side. Initial hybrids with good technology and poor germplasm has created mixed reactions. Now perfect understanding prevails on the benefits of technology and germplasm. The farmers' expectation has become very reasonable. The increased coverage of Bt cotton in India and huge demand for future sowings clearly shows that there are no mixed feelings now.

According to you, how many farmers who used Bt cottonseeds might have taken the extreme step of committing suicide in the last five years in different parts of the country?

There cannot be any suicide death because of Bt cottonseeds. Bt cotton crop had always given the better benefit to the farmer than the non-Bt cotton crop. Bt cotton can never be a cause for suicide. People should understand the Bt technology has got a limited role on protecting the crop from the damage of bollworms. Suicide by farmers may be due to several socio-economic problems.

Which are the other GM crops areas that you contemplate to enter?

We would be interested in insect resistant rice, brinjal, tomato, bhendi, virus resistant bhendi, tomato and cassava.

What is the status of your R&D facility for GM crops?

Work is in progress to create the facility, sourcing technology, recruiting technical manpower.

Do you feel the government should allow more GM crops in India?

Yes. This is in view of the substantial benefit to the farmers and consumers.