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Field trials of genetically modified corn

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Recently planted corn stalks stand a few inches above ground on a farm, Friday, June 10, 2011 near Batavia, Ohio. – AP Photo

AFTER nearly succeeding in the case of Bt cotton, the US multinational Monsanto is now lobbying for introduction of genetically modified corn in Pakistan and has convinced the government to have field trials of its crop.

Some media reports say that the bureaucracy is apparently inclined to allow its commercial planting although many experts, academics and farmers are opposed to it.

Field trials, being closely monitored by the government agencies to assess its cross pollination impacts, are being conducted in Manga Mandi, about 25-30 km from Lahore. After obtaining initial nod from the regulatory authorities, demonstrative cultivation will take place in 2012.

A spokesperson of Monsanto claims that the field trials have so far been successful and cross germination preventions have proved their effectiveness. The GM corn would bring more reliable and cost-effective solutions and that the insect-protected corn will increase productivity. He said that the countries that approved GM corn had allowed it for human consumption.

But Prof Dr Muhammad Ashfaq, Dean, University of Agriculture, Faisalabad, says the issue whether GM foods are safe enough to consume remains unresolved. Although some experts warn of possible hazards to human health in the long run, the main issue is whether labelling GM foods would help consumers by giving them a choice to buy or not to buy these foods, he said.

The controversy over how safe the consumption of genetically modified foods, seeds and products are to human health is now 15-years old. The opposition is most intense in Europe, Japan although GM is undesirable in most of the world for its long-term side-effects to soil and health. The European Union has so far approved only one genetically modified crop – maize or corn. But there is a deep divide over GM in the 27-member bloc.

Despite the approval, six countries have still imposed a moratorium on the GM corn crop. They are France, Germany, Luxembourg, Greece, Austria and Hungary. And even in countries like Italy, where no formal ban applies, no one chooses to plant the crop. However, it is cultivated on a large-scale in Spain.

India also remains sharply divided over the legacy of Bt cotton, the only transgenic crop now under commercial cultivation in the country. The genetically altered cotton seeds have increased productivity, but they are more expensive than traditional seeds and have left some farmers deeply in debt leading to mass suicides.

Last year India halted the commercial release of the world's first genetically engineered eggplant, called Bt brinjal, for lack of consensus within the scientific community.

In the US, GM crops and seeds were developed in the 1970s, with significant financial support from the Rockefeller Foundation, by three chemical companies, namely, Monsanto Chemicals, DuPont and Dow Chemicals. All the three were also involved in the scandal of the highly toxic Agent Orange used in Vietnam. Their marketing of GM seeds was seen as a clever way to trap the farmers by forcing them to purchase only their chemicals such as Roundup under a legal contract.

In Pakistan, use of modern biotechnology started in 1985. Currently, there are 29 biotech centres or institutes in the country. However, few centres have appropriate facilities and trained manpower to develop GM crops. Most of the activities have been on rice and cotton. Despite acquiring capacity to produce transgenic plants, no GM crop has been introduced in the country.

Their commercial release is hampered due to delays and weak capacity of regulatory bodies related to biosafety and Plant Breeders Rights. But it has resulted in illegal cultivation of Bt cotton smuggled from India on a large area as there exists a strong demand for it among the farmers community. So far, the development of GM crops has remained restricted to the public sector.

Monsanto has been working with the industry and the government for introduction of Bt cotton. The American giant looks closer to its goal for which it has been struggling since 1998 when it entered Pakistan market. It has developed the much-needed nexus with the bureaucracy in Islamabad.

In fact, the global financial crisis of 2007 and the shortages it caused in supply of commodities in the world proved to be a blessing for the multinationals selling GM seeds and products. Japan and South Korea, long known for consuming organically grown corn, began buying GM corn for use in soft drinks, snacks and other foods because organic corn prices tripled.

In the wake of last year's floods that partially devastated cotton crop, Pakistan's agriculture ministry was reported to have entered into a deal with Monsanto for large-scale import of its Bt cotton seeds. But it remained unconfirmed. The Seed Association of Pakistan, however, warned the Punjab government to refrain from signing an agreement with Monsanto, saying this will "annihilate national seed companies, besides causing huge financial burden on the national treasury."

Last year, two scientists had cautioned the government against signing any deal with Monsanto for the introduction of so-called "insect-resistant" Bt cotton, saying it could harm the interests of growers. Dr Anwer Naseem, chairman, National Commission on Biotechnology, said on March 21: "There is a need to get sound, critical and scientific input from experts in the country before signing a deal." Dr Abid Azhar, deputy director of AQ Khan Institute of Biotechnology and Genetic Engineering, University of Karachi, had said there were instances when growers have been forced to purchase seeds from the multinationals for every crop after the introduction of alien varieties. "In this way, the multinationals have attempted to monopolise the seed business," he said.

However, the ministry of agriculture signed an MoU with the US firm on April 10 and the then minister, Nazar Gondal, was so upbeat on the occasion that he hoped it would bring an agriculture revolution in Pakistan. It is amazing to note American diplomats' loyalty to GM products. The US ambassador in Paris, according to a WikiLeaks cable, advised Washington in 2007 that it should start a military-style trade war against any European country which opposes genetically modified crops. His advice was in response to moves by France to ban a Monsanto GM corn variety in 2007. The ambassador, Craig Stapleton, asked Washington to penalise the EU, particularly countries which did not support the use of GM crops.

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