

GEAC member quits over conflict of interest

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Ahead of the first meeting of an expert committee of scientists to determine the kind of tests to be conducted on genetically-modified brinjal, commonly known as Bt brinjal, a prominent member of the Genetic Engineering Appraisal Committee (GEAC) has resigned from the panel.

The resignation of P Anand Kumar comes following an appeal by the co-chair of the panel at its last meeting to members to quit if they had a conflict of interest. Kumar, who was a member of GEAC under his capacity as head of the National Research Centre on Plant Biotechnology (NRCPB) under the Indian Agricultural Research Institute (IARI), resigned last week.

When contacted, Kumar said he was no longer part of GEAC, but declined to say more. People close to Kumar said he was dissatisfied with the repeated political interference in GEAC and neglect of science in it. However, according to the Supreme Court appointee in GEAC, Pushpa Bhargava, it was agreed in GEAC in a recent meeting that members would sign a form saying they had no conflict of interest. The other pledge they were to take was an oath of silence on proceedings till it was put in the public domain.

Kumar had been facing criticism all of last year for allegedly being the author of a report prepared by six science academies, which had favoured the immediate release of Bt brinjal.

Environment Minister Jairam Ramesh had commissioned the report but later rejected it last year, saying it said nothing new that he did not know. The report was revised and sent to the ministry, and according to Bhargava, it was as bad as the first.

More resignations are expected, as all those members who are associated with institutions that develop GM crops, supposedly have the same stand as that of Kumar.

B M Khadi, principal scientist in University of Agricultural Sciences, Dharwad; V S Chauhan, scientist in the International Centre for Genetic Engineering and Biotechnology; K K Tripathi, advisor Department of Biotechnology, fall in this grey area if this criterion is applied.

“All those who work to develop GM crops would fall in that bracket. For how can those who develop GM crops be part of a regulatory body on it? How can you regulate yourself?” asks Bhaskar Goswami, trade and policy analyst in Forum for Biotech and Food Safety. Meanwhile, the first meeting of an expert panel of scientists to determine the tests to be conducted on Bt brinjal is expected to be held later this month. The meeting will be the first such exercise after a moratorium was put on commercial introduction of this variety of brinjal last year.

Eminent agricultural scientist M S Swaminathan, along with P M Bhargava, G Padmanabhan and M Vijayan, are among the scientists in the expert panel

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