

Biosafety News

GM Mustard Faces New Hurdles: Eight More Tests, Risk Report

In a move that has effectively placed commercial cultivation of GM Mustard in cold storage for now, biotech regulator Genetic Engineering Approval Committee (GEAC) has outlined several steps before the hybrid could be brought back to the table for a review. Besides suggesting eight time-consuming additional bio-informatic tests for inclusion in the seed's biosafety dossier, the GEAC on February 5 asked the Centre for Genetic Manipulation of Crop Plants (CGMCP) to prepare a Risk Assessment and Risk Management (RARM) document.

It set a timeline of two weeks for submission of the revised biosafety dossier but separately recommended a long winding procedure for “further review and consultation” on the biosafety data. “The revised dossier received from the applicant would be considered by the Sub-Committee and a Biosafety RARM report would be prepared for consideration of the GEAC,” it said.

The report would have to incorporate all concerns raised by Coalition for GM-Free India, Bihar Chief Minister Nitish Kumar, various representations and even comments in the media. Subsequent to the review, and if the biosafety dossier is found to be complete in all respects, the GEAC has recommended that both dossier and RARM report — minus certain confidential segments — be put out in the public domain for comments.

However, no information would be posted while the review is still under progress, said the biotech regulator. “A detailed response to the comments received would be prepared and considered before a final decision is taken by the GEAC,” says a note from the Environment Ministry.

Bowing to the widespread opposition by farmers and NGOs, the GEAC “also agreed that an opportunity for personal hearing may be provided as and when requested”. After the GEAC meeting on February 5, Environment Minister Prakash Javadekar had said his ministry would not rush into any decision or “impose decisions without wide consultations”.

Before the fresh review procedure starts, the committee will meet first — likely on March 3 — to finalise the modalities for preparing the RARM report “including roles, responsibilities, consultation, time lines etc”. The GEAC, meanwhile, has now decided to meet every month, which is its original mandate, with the first Friday of each month set as the meeting date. Last year, the GEAC met only twice.

The spat over GM Mustard DMH-11 has turned into a national debate even though this variety is being developed by Delhi University's CGMCP which has pledged to distribute it

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for free. The project is funded by DU's Department of Biotechnology and the National Dairy Development Board.

Supporters of GM mustard — which has the potential of increasing yield by 25 per cent — say it is required in India as the country is still dependent on edible oil imports. India's rapeseed-mustard seed production stood at 63.09 lakh tonnes in 2014-15 crop year (July-June).

This is the first proposal that has come up before the NDA government after the previous regime had put a moratorium on commercial cultivation of Bt Brinjal in 2010. Currently, Bt cotton is the only GM crop allowed for commercial cultivation.

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