

## GM mustard may be stalled indefinitely



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PTI

Farmers protesting against GM mustard in Bhopal recently.

*SC will hear petition on Friday; comments invited by environment ministry have to be vetted*

Even though transgenic mustard (GM mustard) may have been declared safe by a government sub-committee, it may yet remain in the can for an indefinite period.

On Friday, the Supreme Court is expected to hear a petition by anti-GMO (genetically modified organism) campaigner Aruna Rodrigues, who argues that the Centre's preliminary clearance to GM mustard, named Dhara Mustard Hybrid-11 (DMH-11), contravenes a 2013 report by a Supreme Court-appointed technical expert committee.

This committee had said, among other things, that herbicide-tolerant crops ought not be permitted in India. One of the genes in DMH-11, developed by researchers at the Delhi University under a publicly-funded project, contains a gene called 'bar' that confers herbicide tolerance. This makes plants resistant to a class of weedicide containing the chemical glufosinate. Critics say glufosinate is toxic and makes farmers dependent on certain brands of crop chemicals. "If the court sees merit in the argument, then this could indefinitely stall GM mustard," said a government official closely involved in the GM mustard-appraisal process.

The Supreme Court is yet to pass an order on an older petition by Rodrigues on whether GM crops ought to be tested at all in India.

A sub-committee of the Genetic Engineering Appraisal Committee (GEAC) — India's regulator of GM crops and an environment ministry body — said in August that DMH-11 was an effective hybrid and the 'bar' gene's presence wouldn't practically affect mustard farmers. They put up their report on the ministry website for public comments until October 5. "The process is ongoing... now we have to take a considered decision," Environment Minister Anil Dave told *The Hindu*, adding "the sowing season is almost over... I don't see it as being available this year."

### 800 comments received

In a press statement on Thursday, the Environment Ministry said it had received about 800 comments from farmers, scientists and non-governmental organisations. The GEAC would now go through the comments, convene a full sitting of its members and pass a verdict, and this too will be vetted by the Environment Minister and possibly the Prime Minister's Office, said a person familiar with the procedure.

Mustard is one of India's most important winter crops and sown between mid-October and late November.

The technology involves using a complex set of genes, sourced from soil bacterium, which makes it easier for seed developers to develop hybrid varieties of mustard, generally a self-pollinating plant. The technology, its proponents aver, will contribute to increasing yields of such hybrids by 25 per cent when compared with existing varieties. Its detractors contend that the GM seeds so produced aren't substantially better than existing mustard varieties, and that seed developers and biotechnology regulators have colluded to "push" GM mustard.

Agriculture is a State subject in India, which means that even if a central regulator were to deem a plant as 'safe', it would need to be cleared by State authorities.

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