

Rice, Wheat, Mustard... India Drives Forward First GMO Crops Under Veil of Secrecy

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A secret application has been made to India's GEAC (Genetic Engineering Appraisal Committee) for a new variety of GMO mustard to be released for cultivation.

If accepted, this would be the first GMO variety to be approved in India – and could open the way for many more such applications for other major crops including staple foods like rice, wheat and chickpeas.

According to India's [Business Standard magazine](#), Deepak Pental, developer of the 'Dhara Mustard Hybrid 11' (DMH11) mustard seed at Delhi University, said that he had sent the proposal to the GEAC in mid-September. The GEAC is expected to meet again next week to consider the application.

The GEAC, part of the Ministry of Environment, Forests & Climate Change, is the statutory authority that appraises proposals for field trials and commercial sale of GM crops. The final decision rests with the Union environment, forests and climate change minister.

The [official website of the GEAC](#) makes no mention of this or any other recent application – indeed the entire website appears to be many years out of date and unmaintained. The most recent 'status of pending projects' reports [dates from March 2007](#). No minutes of meetings have been posted since April 2012.

India's *Economic Times* also reported on 3rd September that a secret meeting of the GEAC had been [called that day](#) to discuss 17 applications for field trials of six GMO including varieties of cotton, corn, brinjal, chickpea, rice and wheat.

"The GEAC did meet today and certain decisions were taken. However, they cannot be shared at this stage as minutes have to be made and the minister's approval is required as well", an unnamed "senior official from the Union Ministry of Environment & Forests (MoEF)" told ET, which added:

The decisions taken at the GEAC were kept absolutely wrapped in secrecy at the Environment ministry. The members of the GEAC whom ET spoke to refused to share any information on the decisions taken at the meeting.

The DMH11 GMO mustard, developed by Delhi University, embodies transgenic technology designed to facilitate hybridisation. Deepak Pental also claims the variety delivers a 30% yield increase.

A veil of secrecy over GMO deliberations

Prominent campaigner [Aruna Rodrigues](#), who in 2013 challenged the Indian government over its “reckless promotion” of GMO crops in India’s Supreme Court, has denounced the secrecy surrounding the current round of GMO applications.

Consistent with the total absence of any recent information on the GEAC website, she argues that official regulators have hidden all data about the GM mustard from the public and the independent scientific community – in the process violating constitutional provisions and the orders of the Supreme Court.

The Supreme Court in 2008 had ordered that biosafety data be placed in the public domain when petitioners argued that unless the toxicity and allergenicity data are made known to the public, the applicants and concerned scientists in the country would not be in a position to make effective representations to the concerned authorities.

Rodrigues believes that the mandatory rigorous biosafety protocols required by law have not been carried out and the data pertaining to DMH11 therefore needs to be concealed.

According to Rodrigues, the secrecy surrounding GM mustard exemplifies the appalling state of regulation and smacks of corruption. She concludes the Indian government is using underhand means to introduce GM crops into Indian agriculture and that there appears to be no place for science or transparency in this process.

Kavitha Kuruganti, Convenor of Alliance for Sustainable & Holistic Agriculture (ASHA), has also been seeking biosafety data for DMH11 GM Mustard without success. “GEAC is functioning in a highly secretive fashion”, she complains.

And while the nation does not know what is happening inside the regulatory institutions with applications like this GM mustard, biosafety data is being repeatedly declined by the regulators. What are the regulators hiding and whose interests are they protecting?

She goes on to ask: “*Why should the regulators be trusted for their safety assessment when in the case of both Bt cotton and Bt brinjal, the Supreme Court Technical Expert Committee (SC TEC) which took up a sample biosafety analyses in 2013 showed that the regulators were wrong in concluding the safety of these GMOs? ...*

This current Government seems to be keen to conduct regulatory processes in a secretive fashion. Our past requests to meet with the Environment Minister to share our concerns met with no success. As the government gets more secretive and opaque around regulation, the public has a right to know what are they afraid of, if everything is safe and scientific?

Four expert reports conclude: India is not ready for GMOs

The proposed approval of DMH11 also flies in the face of four official reports that recommend against introducing GMOs to India due to the lack of integrity, independence and scientific expertise in assessing GMO risk:

- The ‘Jairam Ramesh Report’ of February 2010, imposing an indefinite moratorium on Bt Brinjal, overturning the apex Regulator’s approval to

- commercialise it;
- the 'Sopory Committee Report' (August 2012);
- the 'Parliamentary Standing Committee' (PSC) Report on GM crops (August 2012);
- and the 'Technical Expert Committee (TEC) Final Report' (June-July 2013).

The latest TEC report recommends an indefinite moratorium on the field trials of GM crops until the government devises a proper regulatory and safety mechanism.

The Coalition for a GM Free India is therefore demanding that the Union Minister for Environment, Forests and Climate Change, Prakash Javadekar, immediately intervene to stop the processing and approval of this GM mustard and makes public all the information regarding the safety tests of the GM Mustard.

Rajesh Krishnan, Convenor of Coalition for a GM-Free India, says the government's intention is to speed through a raft of GMO applications: *"This GM mustard is also a backdoor entry for various other GM crops in the regulatory pipeline."*

While herbicide tolerance as a trait has been recommended against by committee after committee in the executive, legislative and judiciary-based inquiry processes in India related to GM crops, this GM mustard uses herbicide tolerance.

Non GMO options are already proven to work

Krishnan also argues that, more importantly, there are non-GM agro-ecological options like 'System of Mustard Intensification' yielding far higher production than the claimed yields of this GM mustard of Delhi University:

Contamination is inevitable of all other mustard varieties, while India is the Centre of Diversity for mustard. This is clearly one more GMO that is unwanted and unneeded and is being thrust on citizens in violation of our right to choices, as farmers and consumers.

He adds that the GM mustard hybrid has been created mainly to facilitate the seed production work of seed manufacturers – even though farmers already have a choice of non-GM mustard hybrids in the market, in addition to high yielding mustard varieties.

The claim is that GM mustard will provide yield increases of 25-30%. However, Rodrigues argues that higher yields are not the result of these particular transgenes but rather a direct result of hybridisation of normal crop genes.

This is basically a case of deception, she says: the use of high-yielding hybrids is a deliberate ploy to camouflage the yield attributable to the hybrid and assign it to the GM crop instead. She says that this is precisely the story that ensued with Bt cotton (which is now having [disastrous consequences](#) for many farmers) and that thread wove its way through Bt brinjal and now, openly for mustard.

Rodrigues says that the fraud is unprecedented and the case surrounding GM mustard in India is evidence of unremitting regulatory delinquency. The secrecy and regulatory

delinquency that Rodrigues talks of is integral to the speeding up of the wider agenda of restructuring Indian agriculture for the benefit of an increasingly impatient Western agribusiness cartel.

[These companies are pushing](#) an unsustainable and poisonous industrialised model of farming on India based on a never-ending stream of petro-chemical inputs, commodity crops and corporate (GM) seeds. This is already impoverishing farmers and driving them out of agriculture and will ultimately have [tremendously negative consequences](#) for the nation's food sovereignty, health and security.

An indefinite [moratorium was placed](#) on Bt brinjal (eggplant) in India in 2010. Regulators sought public feedback on that particular food crop and the Government of India took up public consultations before taking a final decision on Bt brinjal's commercial cultivation fate in India.

But they now appear to be abandoning that precedent and moving ahead with DMH11 mustard – and other crops essential to India's food security – without even a pretence at consultation or release of essential scientific information.

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