

GM MUSTARD TRIALS MAY GET NOD SOON

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The environment ministry is set to convene this month a “special meeting” of the Genetic Engineering Appraisal Committee (GEAC) to decide on field-trial approvals for the controversial transgenic mustard developed by the University of Delhi’s Centre for Genetic Manipulation of Crop Plants (CGMCP), according to a person familiar with the developments.

The CGMCP had earlier applied to grow transgenic mustard (DMH-11) in plots in Delhi and Punjab to test the plant’s effects on honeybees after the GEAC, which had initially cleared the GM crop for “commercial cultivation”, backtracked and demanded more tests and additional data on honeybees and other pollinators and on soil microbial diversity.

The GEAC, the country’s apex regulator of transgenic products, had in July put a decision on the proposed field trials on hold after some members objected to the use of “unapproved pesticides/herbicides” in the project proposal, according to a record of the meeting made public this week.

The CGMCP team had proposed to use endosulfan — a banned pesticide — as part of their experiment, according to the person, who was present at the July meeting and didn’t want to be identified. The trial protocols had also been submitted just three days before the GEAC meeting and some members had voiced objections over the lack of time to examine the field safety protocol. The field safety protocol specifies what measures can be undertaken in case there’s a pest attack on the mustard being tested.

“This was a minor technicality [the mention of endosulfan] and we’re hoping this can be addressed such that this can be considered in a special meeting this month itself,” the person said. Mustard is usually sown in October and typically takes about three months to mature.

In March, the GEAC had sought more tests for GM mustard in the wake of a chorus of objections to the transgenic crop and following Union Environment Minister Harsh Vardhan’s intervention in the matter.

Environmentalists, farmer groups and some scientists argue that transgenic mustard poses several environmental and health risks. Included among these is a contention that it contains a foreign gene from another species, that tests so far have failed to show any appreciable gains in yield over traditional varieties and that it could, if commercially approved, make farmers growing the GM mustard dependent on glyphosate — a weedicide that has been linked to cancer.

Deepak Pental, who leads the mustard project at CGMCP, dismissed the objections voiced at the GEAC meeting as “childish”, adding that the protocol section on what insecticides could be used was part of the Indian Council of Agricultural Research protocol.

“One of my colleagues had specified 2-3 insecticides in case of an attack by the painted bug [a mustard pest]. Maybe it wasn’t updated to reflect that endosulfan is no longer used and it’s not even available in the market. So how can anybody use it?” Mr. Pental asked in a phone conversation with The Hindu. “These are just spanners to delay the process.”

Were it to be cleared it would be the first transgenic food crop to be allowed in India.

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