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Need for infrastructure to test imported GM food: government

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NEW DELHI, MARCH 27: The government has noted the urgent need to develop adequate infrastructure for testing genetically modified (GM) food that are being clandestinely imported into the country. It has also decided to assess the baseline capacity for biosafety needs.

The situation has also become imperative as transgenics developed for as many as 13 crops in the country are undergoing contained limited field trials and multi-location trials and are waiting for approvals for commercial cultivation. There are over 22 transgenic food under various stages of research.

At present, there are guidelines in place for testing GM crops and seeds, but not for a finished product which may contain traces of genetically modified organisms (GMOs).

In this context, the government has waken up to the reports of clandestine imports of GM food. It has decided to identify and develop capacities for testing and certification of GM foods.

The two-day workshop on capacity building on biosafety organised by the Union ministry of environment and forests and the industry body, Biotech Consortium India Ltd, which concluded on March 24, also urged for revision of the Prevention of Food Adulteration Act to accommodate the concerns centering GM food. The guidelines for food safety should be in accordance with international norms. It was also decided to evaluate the cost to be incurred for labeling of GM food before taking a final decision on the issue.

However, Manan Bhatt, senior vice-president of the Bangalore-based private sector company, Avestha Gengraine Technologies, says that his organisation is the only in the country which is capable of detecting traces of GMOs in food. He said: "We have technologies to detect traces of GMOs in food. Occassionally, some importers ask us to conduct tests and we test their import consignments. If the customs department wants us to check food consignments at the points of entry, we are prepared to undertake this exercise." Mr Bhatt was in Delhi to participate in the workshop.

The two-day workshop was aimed at preparing the country in capacity building for implementation of the Cartagena Protocol. India has ratified the protocol and is preparing to participate in the second meeting of parties (MoP-2) scheduled in the middle of the year in Montreal in Canada.

The workshop also called for monitoring of long-term impact of living modified organisms (LMOs) on biodiversity. It called for effective coordination among various stakeholders and agencies and private and public sector partnership. It had, however, made no specific reference to participation of NGOs as stakeholders.

The workshop called for transparency in evaluation of transgenic crops developed by both private and public sector institutes. It called for "commercialisation of approved events in exporting countries."

There are as many as 35 public sector institutes and universities and 18 private sector companies engaged in developing transgenic crops. The transgenic developed for 13 crops which are approved for contained limited field trials and multi-location trials are:

- Insect-resistant brinjal developed by Indian Agricultural Research Institute, Tamil Nadu Agriculture University and Maharashtra Hybrid Seed Company (Mahyco).

- Insect-resistant cotton developed by UAS, Dharwad, Ankur Seeds, JK Agri Genetics, Krishidhan Seeds, Mahyco, Nath Seeds, Rasi Seeds, Syngenta India, Nuziveedu Seeds, Mahendra Hybrid Seeds, Tulsi Seeds, Ganga Kaveri, Vikki's Agrotech, Pravardhan Seeds, Prabhat Agri Biotech and Ajeet Seeds.

- Insect-resistant cabbage developed by IARI and Mahyco.
- Insect-resistant cauliflower developed by Mahyco.
- Virus-resistant groundnut developed by Icrisat.
- Superior hybrid mustard, resistant to fungal attack, plants with high level of Beta carotene, tolerant to abiotic stress - developed by IARI, National Research Centre on Weed sciences, Jabalpur, ProAgro PGS India, TERI and University of Delhi South Campus.
- Insect-tolerant okra developed by Mahyco.
- Insect-tolerant potato enriched with protein developed by Central Potato Research Institute, Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) in collaboration with National Centre for Plant Genome Research.
- Transgenic rice resistant to lepidopteran pests, bacterial blight, sucking pests, fungal infection, insects and salt developed by the Directorate of Rice Research, Hyderabad, Osmania University, IARI, Mahyco, Madurai Kamaraj University, Tamil Nadu Agriculture University and MS Swaminathan Research Foundation.
- Transgenic pigeonpea resistant to fungal pathogens developed by ICRISAT, Mahyco.
- Insect resistant sorghum developed by Mahyco.
- Insect-resistant tobacco developed by Central Tobacco Research Institute.
- Transgenic tomato resistant to insects, fungal infection and virus developed by IARI, JNU in collaboration with NCPGR, Mahyco.

Apart from these there are 22 transgenic crops under various stages of research in the country. These are - two varieties of blackgram, brassica, brinjal, cabbage, cauliflower, chickpea, cotton, groundnut, muskmelon, mustard and rapeseeds, okra, pigeonpea, potato, rice, sorghum, sugarcane, sunflower, tobacco, tomato, watermelon and wheat.