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AIPSN Letter to GEAC:: Implement and Strengthen regulatory effectiveness to protect Indian food and agricultural systems

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ALL INDIA PEOPLE'S SCIENCE NETWORK (AIPSN)

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To

28.10.2021

Shri A.K. Jain

The Chairperson,

Genetic Engineering Appraisal Committee,

Ministry of Environment, Forest & Climate Change,

Indira Paryavaran Bhavan, JorBagh, New Delhi

anilk.jain@gov.in

Dear Shri A.K. Jain,

Sub: Implement and Strengthen regulatory effectiveness to protect Indian food and agricultural systems

We bring to your attention the widely circulated news in national media (e.g. The Hindu front page dt 21.10.2021 and [The Hindu Editorial of 21.10.2021](#)) about the discovery of Genetically Modified rice in a consignment that was exported from India recently to EU countries.

Rice being one of the biggest agricultural exports, such incidents will dearly cost us given the fact that our country exported Rs 65000 crore worth rice in the financial year 2020-21. Being a major commodity exported this affects our reputation and also MSPs paid to our farmers.

In [June 2021, France has claimed](#) that 500 tons of genetically modified rice was discovered in the consignment imported from India. The issue concerns 500 tons of broken Indian white rice which was imported into Europe, transformed into rice flour, resold and put on the market in many European countries as an ingredient in (among other things) chocolate sweets from the Mars company (M&M's Crispy) and baked goods. [After the news came out, the Government](#) has rightly asked the EU to provide

details and has also identified Maharashtra based exporter as the party involved while pointing out that the consignment was given a non-GMO certification by an independent agency before it was shipped to France.

Another article mentions that the rice flour made from the GM broken rice was marketed in several European countries, United States and many other countries. The alerts regarding GM rice from India led to withdrawal of many batches of GM flour.

In India for the last few years various GM rice varieties are at different stages of confined field trials. These give rise to concerns in the context of GM seeds contamination/leakage especially when coupled with poor regulation.

To-date India does not allow for GM rice cultivation. However, reports have already warned on how the increase in number of field trials for GM rice in India could lead to contamination or leaks. Global experiences show us that seed and food supply chains can get contaminated from field trials of GM crops in general and GM rice in particular. Fresh in memory is the 2006 GM rice fiasco in USA, where a GM rice variety, LLRICE601 under Bayer's field trial, contaminated US rice and seeds. This eventually led to USA's rice exports plunging in the subsequent years. The fiasco led Bayer paying huge compensation in lieu of damages caused to affected farmers. The GM Contamination Register contains records of GM contamination incidents since 1997. Analysis of the database from 1997-2013 revealed that rice had the highest number of GM contamination incidents of all crops (accounting for a third of incidents).

In recent years there were reports on alleged illegal cultivation of "Bt brinjal", "Bt soybean" and "Bt Maize". The GM testing biosafety laboratory of ICAR NBPGR is entrusted laboratory and regularly tests the presence for GM contamination from samples sent to them from across the country.

It is unfortunate and of great concern that both GEAC and DBT have failed to take effective regulatory actions against the violators who without prior approvals from GEAC continue to market the GM crops and contaminate farmers' fields. So far no attempts are known to have been taken to stop illegal GM crops and identification of perpetrators. In early part of this century there were reports of Bt cotton sales by certain seed companies and commercial cultivation in states such as Gujarat in early part of this century without prior approval from GEAC. GM crop seed leakages from field trials tend to end up in our farms and food. It is an unfortunate truth that our regulatory system has been found ineffective in curbing this following another ban by Japan and South Korea on Canadian wheat imports.

Concerns have been raised many times in the past about how strictly trial fields are monitored, and as regards monitoring of protocols for separation of trial and farmers fields, as well as periodic testing of samples to guard against cross-contamination.

At the same time, there are also very serious questions about events at the EU/French end. The testing agency does not appear to be independent. There is no transparency regarding the testing data and procedures, and how effective or credible they are. Many doubts arise regarding the reported French findings. Past experience also shows that all manner of allegations arise in the EU, US or other advanced countries regarding agri-produce from India, which serve to damage the reputation of Indian agri produce in Western markets so as to suppress competition.

In this context, given the urgency of the matter we demand:

- A thorough and **independent** (not only departmental as at present) investigation into the events behind these exports.
- **Full transparency regarding the findings**, as well as protocols for monitoring, testing etc governing cross-contamination, and precautions and monitoring of entry of GM foods into the domestic or export markets.
- The Government obtain from EU/French authorities all details regarding their findings, testing procedures and processes etc. and make it publicly available. GEAC must work with APEDA and European Authorities to **obtain and make public the full details**.
- **A penalty clause be instituted under the EPA 1986 to make the event developer legally liable for any unapproved releases of GMOs into the environment, including illegal cultivation of GMOs.**
- Event-specific test protocols (including details of questionable GM genes, primers etc.) collected from French/EU authorities **be made available to accredited laboratories in public sector under ICAR.**
- Standard operating procedures (SOPs) should be immediately made available and **testing/diagnostic kits** for monitoring regulatory bodies like GEAC **be developed and put into place for every complaint related to illegal GM cultivation** in order to quickly fix liability, assessment of contamination *as well as compensating losses to farmers as may occur.*
- An **inter-ministerial, independent empowered laboratory should be set up** with GEAC facilitating the creation of such a body, to avert illegal GM imports (similar to GM free and Phyto-sanitary clearances issued routinely issued from ICAR NBPGR) to avert breach of India's bio-safety and bio-security.

▪ **No field trials of GM crops should be permitted without public consultation** to avoid possible contamination of our food, environment and seed supply chains.

We urge the government to examine these suggestions to prevent further damage to Indian food and agriculture systems.

For your reference a signed letter of this as a pdf file is attached. Looking forward to your acknowledgment, feedback and discussion,

Regards

P.Rajamanickam

Dr. Soma Marla

General Secretary AIPSN

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