Concerns with Unapproved GM Cotton Seeds

What is the issue?

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Reports of expert committee set up by PMO concerns widespread cultivation of unapproved genetically modified (GM) cotton seeds.

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What are the report findings?

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- In India there are widespread cultivation of unapproved genetically modified (GM) cotton seeds.
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- The seeds of these unapproved herbicide-tolerant GM cotton, produced last season, are likely to be used by the farmers in the ongoing cotton planting season as well.
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- Supervisory lapses of this kind can prove disastrous for the environment, biodiversity as well as human and animal health though, fortunately, no such ill-effect has been traced by the panel in this case.
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- Thus the report calls for a thorough review of GM crops regulatory regime and also the entire gamut of policies governing the GM sector.
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What are the flaws with the report?

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- The experts' panel has ruled out any hand of the Mahyco Biotech Company, the original proprietor of the herbicide resistance technology.
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- The company involves in the clandestine production and distribution of these seeds.

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- This company had also presented these new-generation biotech seeds for official approval but it had formally withdrawn them in 2016 when the government lowered the cap on the prices of Bt-cotton seeds as well as the royalty payable to the technology developer.
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- The committee felt that the herbicide-tolerant genes in the cotton crop actually planted by the farmers were stolen during field trials.
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Why farmers rely on GM seeds?

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- In India over 90 per cent of the crop area is under Bt-cotton seeds, the existing Bt-hybrids are gradually losing their effectiveness.
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- Major pests of the cotton, notably the American or pink bollworms, which were restrained by the Bt-cotton, are re-emerging and even getting immune.
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- Farmers did not mind paying substantially higher prices for these seeds reflects their hunger for new and more lucrative technology.
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- They did so knowing full well that they would not be entitled to any compensation for the crop failure due to these seeds and might even be prosecuted for using illegitimate seeds.
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- But farmers are “satisfied with the technology which is less labour-intensive and hence cost-beneficial”.
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What are the pitfalls of government policy in this regard?

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- Government policy is denying a useful technology to the farmers by putting a moratorium on the development and approval of new gene-altered crops.
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- Such an ill-advised policy based on anti-GM lobby is depriving the farmers

of an opportunity to boost their income by bagging larger harvests with lower costs.
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- If the government does not allow the evolution of new and better gene-engineered strains as alternatives to the existing ones, the cotton revolution may not endure for long.
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Source: Business Standard

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Quick Fact

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Herbicide Tolerance Seeds

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- These seeds allows farmers to control weeds in the cotton fields by spraying weedicides rather than removing them through the relatively costly manual or mechanical means.
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