GM Cotton Controversy

What is the issue?

- India’s cotton growers are keen to buy illegal herbicide-tolerant Bt (HTBT) cottonseed varieties at black market rates.
- The organised seed industry and the anti-GM groups are dismayed by it.

What is the reality?

- The moratorium imposed in 2009 on approval of all GM crops remains.
- But, the ground realities with respect to cotton cultivation have undergone a significant change.

What is there a demand for HTBT seeds?

- The demand for the unapproved HTBT cottonseeds has arisen.
- This rise is because India’s dominant BT strain (BG-II) is falling prey to pink bollworm pest attacks in recent years.
- [BG-II - Accounts for most of India’s cotton acreage.]
- Cotton farmers have been faced with falling yields, while dealing with constant or rising costs.
- The HTBT cotton plant is resistant to the usage of glyphosate-based weedicides, a popular labour-saving product.
- This weedicide has been allowed for use in very restricted conditions in India for its alleged carcinogenic effects.

What is the fear?

- According to the organised seed industry, illegal trade in HTBT seeds is of ₹300 crore, with 50 lakh packets of 450g each in circulation.
- They fear it has been used over 15-20% of cotton area.
- This is a straightforward case of market forces rising to meet a genuine demand.

What are the implications?

- The implications of unregulated seed trade are indeed serious.
- This is because the **farmers** in search of high yields may suffer a dead loss if the expensive seeds (selling at over the maximum rates fixed by the Centre)

are spurious.
- Bonafide **seed distributors** and **producers** suffer as well.
- The **farmers' groups** have stepped up protests seeking HTBT approval, allowing for reduced costs and quality control.

What are the actions of the Centre?

- The Centre has said that glyphosate-based weedicides must be applied in the presence of a pest control operator.
- This is an effort taken to curb the use of HTBT seeds.
- However, the sowing season is close to completion.
- Meanwhile, the use of glyphosate in India has increased since 2016-17.
- The Centre must take a clear position on the HTBT issue (GM-based seed technology).

What could be done?

- India should have a credible regulator to assess these issues on a case-by-case basis, involving all stakeholders.
- India's initiatives on this count should be driven by public-funded research.
- The development of indigenous varieties and strains must be given more emphasis, given our gene pool in seeds.
- A pragmatic response to GM is long overdue, with a distinction being made between food and non-food crops.

Source: Business Line

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