

27/7/2020 GSI

Port Policies Biotechnology Regulatory Authority of India

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India should have a credible regulator - the Biotechnology Regulatory Authority of India Bill has been on the backburner since 2013 - to assess issues like the illegal trade of herbicide tolerant Bt seeds

→ Indian Cotton growers are keen to buy illegal herbicide tolerant Bt cotton seed varieties at black market rates but organised seed industry and anti GM groups fear its environmental effects.

→ Demand for HTBT cotton seeds, which arrived on the scene about 4 years back, now dominant Bt strain, on India, BG-II

→ BG II (which was introduced in 2006 and accounts for most of India's cotton acreage) falling prey to pink bollworm pest attack

→ Cotton farmers faced falling yield (from 500 kg/ha in 2017-18 to 443 kg/ha in 2018-19 and 406 kg/ha in 2019-20) while dealing with constant and rising costs.

→ HTBT Cotton plant is resistant to the usage of glyphosate based weedicides, a popular labour-saving product, which too has been allowed for use in very restricted condition in India for its alleged carcinogenic effects.

→ Implications of unregulated Seed trade are indeed serious, as farmers in search of high yields may suffer a dead loss if the expensive seeds are spurious.

→ Bonafide seed distributors and producers suffer as well, while farmers groups have stepped up protests seeking HTBT Approval, allowing for reduced costs and control.

→ The use of glyphosate in India has increased since 2016-17 but larger issue of taking a clear position on GM Based seed technology cannot be shelved.

Way forward

→ Indian Government take decision on GM technologies on scientific evidence.

→ GM technology promoter must convince consumer, environmental activists and alternatives for food production before launching.

→ Extensive research is needed so that human health risk reduce.

Conclusion

India initiative in Biotechnology should be driven by public funded research. A pragmatic rather than knee-jerk response to GM is along overdue, with the distinction being made between food and non-food crops.