



Monthly Bulletin
on Genetic Engineering
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National News

1. A Bad time for Rice

http://greenbio.checkbiotech.org/news/after_bt_brinjal_row_it_rice_variety_storm

BHUBANESWAR: –

After the controversy involving the Bt cotton and Bt brinjal across the State, now it is the turn of Bt rice.

Activists of city-based United Coalition Against Genetic Engineering (UNCAGE) have said that the experiments and subsequent trials by a Orissa-based central institute on a genetically modified (GM) rice will definitely change the 'genetic stock' of the wild and traditional varieties of rice in Orissa which is home to many indigenous species. Rice researcher Prof. Ashutosh Ray said that nothing can be predicted about GM rice, and further added that more research and studies can only reveal the 'truth'.

UNCAGE activists, however, alleged that the proliferation of biotech related projects are linked to the favours of the funding agencies who might ultimately paralyse our native genetic resources through 'germ plasma transfer'.

2. Gates Exploring New Windows!

Translation of the news report by Aneesh Jacob in Mathrubhumi (Malayalam newspaper) of 29th April 2009

http://www.mathrubhumi.com/php/newFimph?news_id=1224604&n_type=NE&category_id=3&Fac=

On the basis of the agreement it has with the International Rice Research Institute (IRRI) in Manila, the Bill & Melinda Gates foundation is creating a partnership with the Kerala Agricultural University (KAU) to do research on GM rice in Kerala. The agreement or MOU states that the goal of the research project is to genetically modify rice to make it resistant to adverse climatic conditions. It further states that this is being done to alleviate poverty in South Asia and Africa.

Environmentalists and anti-GM activists say that this research program is merely a cover

for the Gates foundation to take out (from the state) genes/seeds/germplasm of varieties of paddy found with desirable traits that are of interest to them. As if to prove the accusation right, the MOU between the Gates foundation and KAU has a clause which allows for germplasm to be transferred to the Gates foundation.

IRRI has specified in the MOU that KAU cannot reveal any details about the project or MOU to the public or the media. They have particularly specified that all details about the funding organization should be kept absolutely confidential. It is assumed that this instruction is due to the increasing opposition to GM crops around the world.

Kerala Agriculture minister Sri.Mullakkara Ratnakaran has instructed (KAU) to refer its proposal to do research on GM rice along with the Bill & Melinda Gates foundation to an expert committee. The Minister further added that research programs undertaken in the state should be transparent and also in line with the development agenda/vision set forth by the left front government.

3. Which Way will the Wheel Turn?

Dear Friends

Please see the mail from Aruna Rodrigues, my co petitioner in the PIL filed in the Supreme Court. The mail clearly mentions that the Chief Justice of Supreme Court of India thinks that the genetic engineering will increase yields. As members of the SAGE network all of us clearly know and understand that nowhere in the world you can find evidence that GM crops have not recorded higher yields

I wish that some of our farmers organisations in the SAGE make a request to the Supreme Court where it got this information from which is completely out of tune with the realities of the world.

Satheesh

A response from Ms.Aruna Rodrigues

I'm very happy to see that Kishore Tiwari has written to the Supreme Court about its

astounding comment on balancing the myth of high yields against “side-effects” These side-effects are more properly, the science of the serious hazards intrinsic to the technology of genetic engineering and pesticidal crops which is what GM crops are.

There are some plain facts that need to be known by our people and our farmers. Kishore has the hard experience, which he has written about, on the facts surrounding Bt cotton and farmer suicides in India, particularly in Vidharbha. I have also written to the Times of India (reproduced at the end of this email. I don't think their editors will publish my critical 'rejoinder').

Our food will be made toxic and our seeds contaminated for all time if GM food crops are approved for commercial planting.

You can't strike a balance between toxic food, a major threat to India's biodiversity, which also means the environment that sustains Indian farming on the one hand and any advantage (to the poor) that the SC sees that it should weigh in the balance, even assuming there were some merit to the SC's observation that GM crops will help the poor because they are high yielding crops. I also address this myth below.

If a food is toxic, then it will cause illness: food that causes people to get sick can no longer be classified as food. It is POISON. Also the kind of illnesses that GM foods will likely cause, as studies by independent scientists are increasingly showing, will be long term, like cancers and they will not be attributed to genetic engineering because in India at least, we do not have the ability or the will to track these foods and monitor their impacts. These kinds of studies, which only governments can do at the macro level at which they are required, are called epidemiological studies. Of course, the further point is, that it is precisely the poor who will suffer intensely because they have no access to medical aid of anything approaching 'enough'. 1 billion people will be exposed to GM food crops if the government has its way. As Dr Judy carman says,

“If only 1 in 1,000 of exposed people later gets ill, or has an underlying illness made worse, then over one million Indians would be ill and requiring treatment. This would result in a huge cost to the Indian government and community” (Carman).

It will also be a social cost and health scam of an unimaginable magnitude that will make 'chicken-feed' of every other scam in the country including the Satyam scandal and it will continue without any possibility of reversal. A trade off of any kind is unimaginable.

The GM MYTH of High Intrinsic Yields

The plain science is and there is NO AMBIGUITY, that GM crops do not carry any TRAITS for INCREASED YIELDS. The traits for increased yields belong to the parental lines that are used for making transgenics QED. Doug Gurian Sherman of the UCS (union of Concerned Scientists) says this:

“No currently available transgenic varieties enhance the intrinsic yield of any crops. The intrinsic yields of corn and soybeans did rise during the twentieth century, but not as a result of GE traits. Rather, they were due to successes in traditional breeding”.

On the question of whether there are increased 'operational' yields because Bt is a pesticidal crop targeted at a particular cotton worm, then the jury is in. In China, in AP, in Gujarat, pest resistance is proven to have set in. Unless farmers spray more, yields are falling after an initial rise in the first 2- 3 years. We also have insect shifts in common with the Chinese experience, (the mealy bug in India), which has led to huge crops failures in more than one State. In Vidharbha, a rain fed area, the inappropriate Govt. approval to sowing Bt cotton in this region in particular, has led to heart-breaking crops failure, devastation and suicides. The high input costs are attested to by Sainath, and the Mumbai High Court and the link to suicides confirmed.

The Government of India's stated concerns for the plight of farmers is exploded by P Sainath in numerous articles. The most telling feature of all is this (his May 1st article) and I quote:

“We had locked our farmers into the volatility of global cash crop prices, rigged and controlled by a handful of corporations. Add to this the obscene subsidies that the US and EU threw at their corporations and growers. In the US, subsidies made up two per cent of total farm income in 1974. By year 2000, they made up 47 per cent of total farm income. In item after item, US-EU subsidies destroyed millions of livelihoods, not just in India but across the world.

In India, we made no effort to raise duties to halt the dumping of highly subsidised US cotton on this country. Sharad Pawar was not in the least interested. Cotton was not his baby. The subsidized US cotton was grabbed by our textile magnates. They were getting it virtually free. No prizes for guessing what this did to the cotton price for Vidharbha farmers. Maharashtra’s suicides are perhaps unique. In that state, farmers have written suicide notes addressed to the prime minister and chief minister on the issue (while many experts ponder about why these people are taking their lives)”

There is one very important detail about the US cotton subsidy that Mr Sainath doesn’t know about. The cotton is mainly GM.

Will Kishore please send one of those suicide notes to the media so this deep mystery of farmer suicides is cleared up once and for all. Please ask the leading papers to print. And Kishore, you should have sent it to the SC along with your letter to demonstrate the bonafides of our government.

Aruna R

Letter to the Ed. The Times of India, below:
Subject: Your News Item dated 1st May ‘09
“Poverty More Dangerous than GM Side-effects: SC”

Sir,

I write to express my astonishment at the choice of headline on the outcome of yesterday’s SC hearing of the PIL where I am the lead Petitioner; that it passed the Times of India’s editorial screening.

I am not questioning the veracity of your report about the comment made by the Chief Justice (CJ) of the Supreme Court. But it was a comment and your paper has elevated that comment and instead given it the gravitas of a pronouncement of the Supreme Court Bench headed by the Chief Justice of India. I am therefore, questioning the objective of a national daily of importance suggesting to your reading public that such is indeed the benefit of GM crops (that GM crops will feed the poor with their high yields). Since GM crops are unquestionably a question of national security, (both food and critically India’s biodiversity) I’m constrained to say that it fell short of responsible reporting and is to the detriment of your reading public and the national interest.

This comment of the CJ has no basis in the deliberations and the evidence given to the Supreme Court in the four years since this case was filed. What the public need to know is that the factual scientific issue is that GM crops give no intrinsic yield gains. It is also a fact that we have record-breaking farmer suicides in the Country, levels never approximated in history. In the case of Vidharba these have been linked by the MUMBAI HIGH COURT through its amicus curiae, the Tata Institute of Social Sciences to the inappropriateness of GM crops in a rain-fed region and because of their high input costs. The latter is a point of relevance for farmers everywhere.

The most rudimentary research uncovers the fact that the ‘Industry’ led by Monsanto has contributed to the recent food crisis because of steep price rises sourced in the diversion of food crops to GM biofuel crops. Monsanto has also been docked for hounding farmers in Canada and the US in court cases for patent infringement when their farms were inadvertently contaminated by GM seeds and pollen from other farms. These are companies who exist to promote their bottom line, not feed the poor. Let’s be very clear about this, both as a reality on the ground for farmers and the poor and the science of the present state of GM technology, which does not provide yield gains.

I would be happy to submit an article to your paper detailing the dangers India faces with GM crops and asking the all important question:

Why in heaven's name is our government prepared to risk the health of one billion Indians in perpetuity by forcing untested and unsafe GM food onto our plates?

Aruna Rodrigues
(Lead Petitioner to the SC in a PIL)
for a moratorium on GM crops pending comprehensive and transparent safety-testing in the national interest)

4. Farmers Feel the Sickle!!

Neo-Liberal Terrorism in India: The Largest Wave of Suicides in History
<http://www.counterpunch.org/sainath02122009.html>

The number of farmers who have committed suicide in India between 1997 and 2007 now stands at a staggering 182,936. Close to two-thirds of these suicides have occurred in five states (India has 28 states and seven union territories). The Big 5 – Maharashtra, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh and Chattisgarh – account for just about a third of the country's population but two-thirds of farmers' suicides. The rate at which farmers are killing themselves in these states is far higher than suicide rates among non-farmers. Farm suicides have also been rising in some other states of the country.

It is significant that the count of farmers taking their lives is rising even as the numbers of farmers diminishes, that is, on a shrinking farmer base. As many as 8 million people quit farming between the two censuses of 1991 and 2001. These suicide data are official and tend to be huge underestimates, but they're bad enough.

The spate of farm suicides – the largest sustained wave of such deaths recorded in history – accompanies India's embrace of the brave new world of neoliberalism. The rate of farmers' suicides has worsened particularly

after 2001, by which time India was well down the WTO garden path in agriculture.

What do the farm suicides have in common? Those who have taken their lives were deep in debt those who killed themselves were overwhelmingly cash crop farmers – growers of cotton, coffee, sugarcane, groundnut, pepper, vanilla. (Suicides are fewer among food crop farmers – that is, growers of rice, wheat, maize, pulses.) The brave new world philosophy mandated countless millions of Third World farmers forced to move from food crop cultivation to cash crop (the mantra of "export-led growth"). For millions of subsistence farmers in India, this meant much higher cultivation costs, far greater loans, much higher debt, and being locked into the volatility of global commodity prices. **That's a sector dominated by a handful of multinational corporations.**

5. Patents on Life Forms!

<http://www.financialexpress.com/news/independent-scientists-against-patents-on-life-forms/369727/0>

Global civil society organisations and independent scientists have voiced their concerns over patenting knowledge designed for combating the impact of climate change in agriculture. They have said that such patent rights would make the seeds costlier and would not enable resource poor farmers to fight the onslaught of climate change.

According to Pat Roy Mooney, the Right Livelihood Award winner and founder of the ETC group Canada, such patent rights have been claimed by six leading multinational companies including BASF, Monsanto, Syngenta, DuPont, Bayer. Swaminathan Research Foundation has also claimed process patent rights over three varieties of rice and one on mango, he said

6. How Safe Are GM Foods?

http://www.financialexpress.com/fe_full_story.php?content_id=107906

World over there is an ongoing debate about acceptance or rejection of foods having traces of genetically modified organisms (GMOs) which is otherwise called GM foods.

The advocates of transgenic technology say that there is no credible evidence either to substantiate that GM crops damage the environment or GM food can harm human and animal health. Some even say that as GM crops and foods are safe as their "substantially equivalent conventional counterparts", they

need no testing. They go to the extent of decrying the critics, who have logical and scientific arguments, as "obstructionists."

Dr Arpad Pusztai, an eminent nutrition expert and toxicologist of international repute, is one who dismisses such arguments of the blind supporters of transgenic technology by saying that in the absence of safety studies, lack of evidence cannot be interpreted as proof that it is safe.

GE & Health Implications

7. "GM foods pose health risk"

Wichita, KS - The American Academy of Environmental Medicine (AAEM) 19th may 2009 released its position paper on Genetically Modified foods stating that "GM foods pose a serious health risk" and calling for a moratorium on GM foods. Citing several animal studies, the AAEM concludes "there is more than a casual association between GM foods and adverse health effects" and that "GM foods pose a serious health risk in the areas of toxicology, allergy and immune function, reproductive health, and metabolic, physiologic and genetic health." The AAEM calls for:

- A moratorium on GM food, implementation of immediate long term safety testing and labeling of GM food.
- Physicians to educate their patients, the medical community and the public to avoid GM foods.
- Physicians to consider the role of GM foods in their patients' disease processes.
- More independent long term scientific studies to begin gathering data to investigate the role of GM foods on human health.

The AAEM's position paper on Genetically Modified foods can be found at <http://aaemonline.org/gmopost.html>. AAEM is an international association of physicians and other professionals dedicated to addressing the clinical aspects of environmental health. More information is available at www.aaemonline.org.

8. Soya in Bad Company!

<http://www.laht.com/article.asp?ArticleId=331718&CategoryId=14093>

BUENOS AIRES – The herbicide used on genetically modified soy – Argentina's main crop – could cause brain, intestinal and heart defects in fetuses, according to the results of a scientific investigation released Monday.

In Argentina, farmers each year use between 180 and 200 million liters of glyphosate, which was developed by the multinational Monsanto and sold in the United States under the brand name Roundup.

In the face of the volley of judicial complaints related to the disproportionate use of agrochemicals in the cultivation of GM soy, last February the Health Ministry created a group to investigate the problem in four Argentine provinces.

Argentina is the world's third-largest exporter of soy. EFE

GE Issues Around the World

9. Good Old Soya Gains Ground!

<http://tiny.cc/O4jNw>

COLUMBUS - Cheaper seed and lucrative premiums are driving more crop producers to plant non-genetically modified soybeans this year. U.S. soybean production is 95 percent dominated by genetically modified Round Up Ready soybeans.

Trend

However, a small percentage of that crop - perhaps 5 percent - will be planted to non-GM soybeans and the trend toward the latter is expected to continue in the near future, said Jim Beuerlein, an Ohio State University Extension agronomist.

"There's a shortage of normal germplasm seed because we've been growing Round Up Ready varieties for so long and there wasn't a big demand for non-GM seed. We have just not been developing those kinds of varieties so the seed and the varieties are somewhat limited at this time," he said.

"But seed companies that deal with non-GM varieties are expected to increase their seed production 100 percent, perhaps 200 percent, this year so there will be a lot more seed available next year."

The scene in Brazil too is not very different. This is corroborated by the report of GM Watch [translation for GMWatch by Ralph Miller].

In 2009 the big Coops, which have largely been responsible for the spread of GM soya in the State, are paying a bonus of upto R\$ 2.30 per 60 kilogram bag, in order to cater for clients, mainly European and Asian, who don't accept genetically altered soya.

This season the largest Coop in Brazil, Coamo, from Campo Mourao (PR), is paying a R\$ 2.00 bonus per bag of conventional soya, says its president Jose Aroldo Galassini. Last year of the 2.4 million tons the Coop traded, 900,000 were GM-free.

This whole picture is causing the GM product not to take off in Parana, and even to lose ground. According to a survey made by the Seed and Seedling Association of Parana (Apasem – Portuguese acronym), for the 2008/2009 season there was already a smaller demand for GM soya. Of a total of 4.07 million bags of seed available in the market, 56% were conventional and 44% GMO (against 48% of conventional seed and 52% of GMO, last season).

10. UK stance on GM foods leaves a sour taste

<http://tiny.cc/O4jNw>

A few months ago, a UK government minister told a national newspaper that rocketing food prices and food shortages in the world's poorest countries meant the time was right to relax Britain's policy on use of GM crops. Quite why UK policies on genetically modified organisms were fingered as culprits in world hunger was not clear. The Scottish Government, to its credit, has not been so readily hoodwinked by the GM PR machine. But, despite the risks it poses to the environment and to health, GM is back in play as a widely-touted answer to the world's food needs.

Other countries have gone further to keep the lid on GM. France, in the past few weeks, has adopted a label for animal products assuring consumers that they're "fed without GMOs". The French government's anti-GM stance has also led it to ban the planting of a variety of GM corn - the only plant approved by the European Commission for commercial planting in EU member states. That ban has earned it a legal challenge from Monsanto, which owns the variety. Legal sabre-rattling didn't prevent the German agriculture minister from taking the same decision last week, though it, too, now faces a legal suit from Monsanto.

Regrettably, the UK government was one of the latter. It has been consistently among the strongest pro-GM advocates in Europe,

repeatedly disregarding consumer opinion by trying to open European farmland to both GM trials and commercial planting.

This monthly bulletin is brought out by South Against Genetic Engineering (SAGE), a coalition of civil society activists, farmers, scientists, academicians, and consumer groups of four Southern States of India, viz., Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu and Maharashtra. SAGE has been waging a concerted battle against genetic engineering through a series of activities that involve public protests, media actions, seminars, consultations and publication of a series of educational materials.