

SOUTHERN ACTION ON GENETIC ENGINEERING

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Respected Ms Natarajan,

Greetings and warm welcome to you as the new head of the Ministry of Environment and Forests, on behalf of the Southern Action on Genetic Engineering [SAGE] a coalition of 52 organisations in South Indian states of Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Kerala and Tamil Nadu besides Orissa and Maharashtra. The SAGE is a coalition of farmers, scientists, environmentalists, consumers, civil society groups and media practitioners. On behalf of SAGE we must tell you that we hold you with highest regard and look at you with the greatest of expectations on issues concerning environmental health of this country.

Apart from their work on the issue of Genetic Engineering, the members of SAGE are engaged in environmental health, organic agriculture, nutrition and agricultural science, consumer rights and farmers movements. Together they work with over five million farmers, consumers, doctors, scientists etc. But as SAGE their focus is on the impact of Genetic Engineering in agriculture on human, soil and environmental well being in this country.

SAGE has taken up *Democratisation of GE Debate* as its theme in order to engage in this debate grassroots people, especially in the rural areas and small towns since they are the ones who will be most impacted by the GE agriculture but receive very little space in the debate.

It is in this context that the SAGE was delighted when the Genetic Engineering Approval Committee [GEAC] last fortnight said that “all GM trials must be first okayed by the State Governments”. This was a historic decision for two reasons. Firstly state governments are the custodians of agriculture in the country and have the responsibility over the subject. Secondly the state governments through their political and administrative machinery are the closest to the agrarian and rural communities in their states. Therefore they automatically have all the responsibility to safeguard the local communities and the agrarian and environmental health of the country. That there was an oblique endorsement of this fact by the GEAC announcement last fortnight was indeed music to our ears.

But even before we could properly cherish this delight, the news report emanating Mumbai says that the revocation of this decision might be possible. The report says:

Respite is likely to come to those looking to initiate trials in genetically-modified (GM) crops as an important clause requiring state approval for conducting GM trials is likely to be revoked.

This was confirmed by a source from the Genetic Engineering Approval Committee (GEAC), the apex body constituted in the ministry of environment and forests focussing on manufacture, use, import, export and storage of hazardous microorganisms / genetically-engineered organisms or cells, under the Environment Protection Act,1986. The source said that the decision to revoke the clause was a recent one.

This brings back the issue to square one. The biggest concern on GM trials expressed by farmers groups, civil society activists, consumers and environmentalists is primarily of the question of transparency and non democratic processes of decision making. This concern is deepened by the current decision revoke the historic and correct decision of obtaining the state government approval for GM trials. All decisions on the approval of GM crops, approval for trials etc taken by the GEAC is primarily based on the data provided by the biotech companies and not by a strict, public monitored data by independent scientific bodies. The clause that the State Governments should okay GM trials had the potential to correct to some extent this wrong policy. In fact, the trigger for this revocation clause also comes from the industry bodies and not from civil society or farmer groups. Let me quote from the report:

Groups like ABLE-AG (Association of Biotech Led Enterprises-Agriculture Group) have been opposing this clause in the upcoming GEAC guidelines, which makes it mandatory to seek prior permission from the states for trial of GM crops.

According to the Group, it was a detrimental clause, which was likely to delay the process of adoption of the GM technology in the country to multiply yield of food grain crops.

ABLE-AG is a front organization of the biotech industry and it has the profits of the agribiotech corporations as its primary aim. Dear Madame Minister, it does not need any emphasis from our side that subjecting the agriculture and environment of the country to the profit requirements of the corporate sector would be a great crime. Besides, the primary assumption that adoption of genetic engineering in agriculture would ***multiply yield of food grain crops*** would be extremely erroneous and a misplaced faith in the capacity of genetic engineering. History has told us that nowhere in the world the adoption of genetic engineering has increased the yields of crops.

Take the example of the USA, the mother country of genetic engineering. As per the data from the USDA [United States Department of Agriculture] after ten years of production of GM Soy beans, the yields of soy did not increase by a single gram. ***Contrarily, the genetic engineered soy had 5% lower yields compared to conventional soy crop.*** This was not accidental. Actually the pressure on the crop to express all the GE traits becomes so heavy it results in a phenomenon called ***Yield Drag*** which in other terms means that application of GE science on crops results in lower yields. Same phenomenon can be seen in the GM Corn data for ten years in US.

Therefore the assumption that GE crops will create food security in India through increase in yield would be extremely wrong. Actually the ABLE-AG had made a demand to the Government of India in early June this year that *GM trials should be fast tracked and given speedy approval.* This was against the very grain of approval of new seeds and varieties built into agricultural science which demands that there should be at least six to ten years of testing done before a new seed or a new variety is approved. [**Please read attached the letter to your predecessor Shri Jairam Ramesh, the response of Southern Action on Genetic Engineering to the demand from ABLE-AG.**]

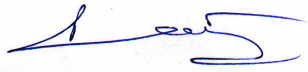
Let us respectfully remind you that overall, field trials of ten GM crops are in the pipeline in different parts of the country according to media reports

In view of these realities, we request you to kindly

- 1 *Outright dismiss the demand for revoking the State Governments approval to the GM trials*
- 2 *Please ask for affidavits from the State Governments on the issue so that they become partners in any new policy decision that the Government of India and GEAC will be taking.*
- 3 *Please declare 2011-12 **The Year of GE Debate in India***
- 4 *Please initiate a nation wide debate on the regulatory process on GM crops. Please hold this at the block level so that the local communities can participate in the debate to the fullest extent*
- 5 *Before this please start an awareness programme on the health and agricultural impacts of GE so that Indian farmers and agrarian communities can participate in the nationwide debate with sufficient prior information on the issue of GE.*

If all these become your first initiatives as the new Minister for Environment and Forests, the nation will gratefully salute you for your contribution to the environment well being of the country and the health of its citizens.

With warm regards



[p v satheesh]

National Convenor, *Southern Action on Genetic Engineering*
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**To: Ms Jayanthi Natarajan, Union Minister for Environment & Forests,
Government of India, New Delhi**

**Attached: SAGE Response to ABLE Demand to Shri Jairam Ramesh, Union Minister for
Environment & Forests, Government of India, New Delhi**