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GM crop not the right solution for India'

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Bangalore: A report by the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Agriculture in India has strongly recommended discontinuation of open field trials of genetically modified cops due to the danger of contamination, while maintaining that GM crops haven't done much to alleviate the condition of cotton farmers in India. Mr Basudeb Acharia, chairperson of the committee, while releasing the report, "Cultivation of Genetically Modified Food Crops - Prospects and Effects", said, "Concerns on the potential and actual impacts of genetically modified (GM) crops to our food, farming, health and environment are valid, as result the committee concludes that GM crops are just not the right solution for our country."

Flaying the unnecessary haste with which the Union government has been promoting GM crops, he said, "The government should stop parroting the promotional lines of the biotechnology and seed industry and their cronies within the technocracy and stand by scientific reasoning and greater public good."

Commenting on the only GM crop commercially cultivated in the country, the report states that Bt cotton has not improved the socio-economic condition of cotton farmers in the country and in fact had furthered their distress, especially in the rainfed areas of the country that form the majority of cotton and farmer suicide belt. The committee held public consultation at Yavatmal in Vidarbha district to find out the ground reality of Bt cotton, the only GM crop commercially cultivated in the country.

The report points out grave inadequacies in the current regulatory system for GM crops and the proposed BRAI mechanism by the government. The committee recommends a regulatory body that is not just for the approval of products of modern biotechnology but also has bio safety as its main mandate.

Besides recommending a decision making role for state governments in any open release of GM crops, the report also strongly recommends the discontinuation of open field trials due to the danger of contamination. This validates many of the cases of field trial violations and contamination that Greenpeace and other civil society members have brought to light over the last 10 years. It is to be noted that open airfield trials of Monsanto's GM maize are currently underway in Punjab and Haryana.

The report comes at a time when the Union government is trying hard to introduce a new regulatory system for GM crops by the name Biotechnology Regulatory Authority of India (BRAI) Bill. "The standing committee report exposes the serious gaps in our country's GM regulatory system and the lopsided GM technology promotion policies of the government," said Ms Neha Saigal, Sustainable Agriculture campaigner, Greenpeace India. She added that it is time that our government prioritise the welfare of its citizens over profit motivated seed companies who are the only ones benefiting from GM crops.

Greenpeace demands the Indian government to take the recommendations of the Parliamentary standing committee on agriculture seriously and immediately act on them.

The committee, over a period of two and half years, travelled across the country and consulted various stakeholders in the debate including farmers, farmer union leaders, biotechnology industry representatives, relevant departments in the Union government, state governments, scientists and civil society members.