

GOVERNMENT ACTS AGAINST FARMERS YET AGAIN- PROAGRO'S INFERIOR GM MUSTARD VARIETY TO BE RELEASED SOON

10 Oct .2002

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The government persists in taking decisions that are against the farmers' interests, Dr. Suman Sahai of Gene Campaign said reacting to the news that a poor quality GM mustard variety belonging to Aventis/Proagro is going to be approved by the GEAC anytime now. The performance of this mustard variety is inferior to good Indian varieties in the field. It gives the farmer absolutely no advantage. All the advantages go to Aventis/ Proagro which seeks to secure a foothold in the Indian seed market, aided by a compliant and compromised scientific bureaucracy. There is simply no justification for this approval.

In addition to the poor performance, there are serious charges of irregularities about the trials conducted by Aventis/Proagro, the reportedly high levels of genetic contamination of normal mustard varieties near trial sites and a less than above board approach to securing a favourable verdict for the release of transgenic mustard.

Dr. Sahai said that India's GM policy, ad hoc as it is, is clearly anti-farmer. The administration appears anxious to please MNCs and curry favour with the money bags, even if it spells ruin for this country's farmers. Bt cotton has been shown to be a disaster in the field this year and Proagro's GM mustard is provenly inferior to existing Indian varieties.

Aventis/Proagro's transgenic mustard is completely unsuited and irrelevant to India because it contains the *barnase-bar-barstar* genes. This system is used in Canada to introduce herbicide tolerance to cope with large scale herbicide use for weed control. *Bar* is a herbicide tolerant gene, *barnase* is an RNase gene and can destroy any cell unless controlled. It is known for its 'leaky expression', which can create unwanted changes, morphological malfunctions and even reduced yields. Barstar inactivates barnase

1. The safety of Proagro's mustard is in question. Food and Feed Safety studies were conducted by Proagro itself, in private institutions (FIPPAT in Chennai and Sriram Institute, Delhi) without the participation of government scientists. Data were cleared without proper testing in Government Institutions/ labs.

The company reportedly supplied both the Samples & Controls- for the tests, making the safety tests a complete farce.

Gene Campaign Demands:

Let the testing protocol for Food and Feed Safety tests be made public.

Identify the source of samples and controls and the testing locations

Make public the safety data on the basis of which the transgenic mustard is getting clearance.

2. Pollen flow & contamination of neighbouring non-GM mustard.

In ICAR conducted tests last year in Pant Nagar, Ludhiana, Kanpur, Mathura and Jabalpur., pollen flow was detected (in Pantnagar) up to 75 m. There are even reports of pollen flow upto 200 m!

In other locations, officials of the company are rumoured to have influenced the data and shown it to be less on the records than it was. Even with evidence of pollen flow of 75m. Isolation distance in the Aventis transgenic trials is recommended as 50m, ensuring genetic contamination of non GM mustard in neighbouring fields.

Demand – Let pollen flow studies be done by public research scientists monitored by an independent panel. Test all the non-GM mustard in the vicinity of transgenic trials and make the data public.

3. The Aventis / Proagro hybrids have not gone through the prescribed procedure of the All India Coordinated Crop trials.

As crop varieties in India are required to do. In India, all varieties have to undergo rigorous testing in all zones at 40-50 locations and a variety is only notified after this process is completed, a process which lasts over three years. The Aventis / Proagro mustard has been tested for only one season, in just 4 locations, in a total of 3 zones- and it is ready for release!

Demand – Let the government identify the people responsible for taking this decision and explain the reason for this special treatment favouring Proagro.

4. Dr. Sahai asked where was the rush in giving clearance to Aventis' mustard when Indian labs are on the threshold of releasing high performance non- GM hybrid mustard varieties.

Promising hybrid mustard varieties are being developed in IARI, in PAU/ Ludhiana and in HAU/ Hissar. All three labs are very close (2-3 years) to releasing non GM mustard varieties with far better performance than the Aventis variety being pushed by the government.

Demand: Let there be an investigation into which people or agencies are behind this relentless support for Aventis' transgenic mustard, at the cost of superior non- GM Indian varieties.

5. It is rumored that the industry (Aventis for this mustard and Monsanto for Bt cotton) has **paid for the travel and hospitality of the government nominees** of the regulatory committees. This is highly irregular and morally questionable. Even worse, it is said that **members have received substantial honorariums from the companies** for doing the evaluation of their field trials.

Demand: Let GEAC and MEC members give undertakings that the companies did not pay any costs for government members and that no honorariums were paid. Let legal action be taken if there are irregularities.

6. According to the procedure and protocol of testing GM varieties, each agency (government laboratory or private company) is required to disclose the details of the varieties used in breeding their GM variety. This is called the passport data. The varieties used also have to be deposited in a designated depository, in this case the NBPGR.

Demand: Let Aventis/ Proagro reveal the passport data of their transgenic mustard under trial and imminent release. Let Aventis/ Proagro and the NBPGR give an undertaking that all varieties used have been deposited with the NBPGR as required.

7. There is talk that several lines of Indian mustard have been sent to the Proagro headquarters in Belgium. This is in violation of the law. No genetic material can leave the country without proper procedures and in accordance with the Convention on Biological Diversity. This includes Prior Informed Consent, Material Transfer Agreements and Information Transfer Agreements.

Demand: Let Aventis/Proagro give an undertaking that this is not the case. That Indian mustard germplasm has not been sent by them to the company headquarters in Belgium.

Gene Campaign demanded that the performance data of the Aventis mustard must be made available to the public. The GEAC's ridiculous, almost criminal obduracy in keeping data secret, suggests that there is a lot to hide and that the decisions on Bt cotton and now GM mustard have been taken knowing that they were damaging to Indian farmers.

The Campaign also demanded that independent experts must be allowed to visit test sites and evaluate the performance. The GEAC and MEC (Monitoring and Evaluation Committee) which are thoroughly discredited institutions, must be reconstituted so that public interest is adequately represented.