

# India will lose on agri-tech, experts tell PM, seek quicker approval for gene-edited plants

Experts associated with IAAG have written to PM Modi claiming approvals for gene-edited plants have been ‘inordinately delayed’ as the regulatory body has sought opinion of states.

SAMYAK PANDEY

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Farmers at work | Representational image | Commons

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**New Delhi:** The India Agriculture Advancement Group International (IAAG), a group of domestic and foreign agriculture experts, has written to Prime Minister Narendra Modi, urging him to accelerate approval of norms related to genome-edited plants in the country.

In the letter, dated 12 October, the group has expressed serious concern at the “inordinate delay” in the approval of “draft guidelines for safety assessment of genome/gene-edited plants”.

Genome editing, also called gene-editing, **is a group of technologies** that give scientists the ability to change an organism’s DNA. These technologies allow genetic material to be added, removed, or altered at particular locations in the genome.



According to the letter, the delay in approvals for these gene-edited plants has been caused by the regulatory body, the Genetic Engineering Appraisal Committee (GEAC), under the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change.

The experts have claimed that rather than taking a final call based on scientific arguments, the GEAC has now sent the draft guidelines, after sitting on them for over a year, to the states for their comments.

The states have been asked to submit their views on the exemption of biosafety trials for SDN1 and SDN2 categories of genome-edited plants, the letter reads.

Products of genome editing that are shown to contain no foreign genetic material or whose altered genetic material is indistinguishable from natural gene pool, or is sourced from primary or secondary gene pool, are known as SDN1 and SDN 2 respectively.

The experts have argued that these categories of genome-edited plants don't contain any DNA foreign to them, and hence many countries have already taken the decision to treat them as plants developed through conventional and mutation breeding, which makes them safe for human consumption.

Ram Kaundinya, Director General at the Federation of Seed Industry of India and Alliance for Agri Innovation, who is also a signatory to the letter, told ThePrint, "For the last two years, there has been uncertainty and no investment in this sector. While the world is moving forward with this technology, India remains backwards. Now if there is further delay with more complicated regulations, owing to feedback from states, then it will completely derail the process. We are already lagging by 2-3 years when compared to other countries."

He added that the SDN1 and SDN2 categories don't need any regulatory oversight.

"The SDN1 and SDN2 varieties undergo normal plant breeding but just faster through editing tools; therefore, they don't need any regulatory oversight," he said. "GEAC, however, has written to all states asking them if SDN1 and SDN2 can be exempt from the regulations. But states aren't equipped with any scientific bodies to comment on this



scientific matter. We are worried and in that context, this letter was written that a non-scientific consultation will get in the way or fractured opinions from states will further delay the project.”

In the letter to the PM, IAAG has requested his immediate intervention in overcoming the current stalemate on guidelines as in the past science-led innovations have resulted in green, white and blue revolutions.

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## **Draft guidelines already reviewed by expert panel: Letter**

The letter written by the agricultural experts has noted that the draft guidelines have already been reviewed by an expert committee constituted by the Department of Biotechnology, under the Ministry of Science and Technology. It added that the norms were later endorsed by the Review Committee on Genetic Manipulation (RCGM), which falls under the same ministry, before being forwarded to the GEAC.

GEAC is the nodal agency that grants approval to agricultural biotechnology-related companies to carry out field trials.

“This is technology that can democratise biotechnology tools and make them available to small companies and farmers,” Kaundinya said.

“So scientific bodies like the Trust for Advancement of Agricultural Sciences (TAAS) gave recommendations to keep the regulations to a minimum and not make them arduous for small entities, thereby excluding SDN1 and SDN2. These are the recommendations of many people and were accepted by the Department of Biotechnology.”

Dr R.S. Paroda, founder chairman of TAAS and another signatory to the letter, told ThePrint that gene-editing can solve a number of problems associated with agriculture.



“This technology can be used to address many problems such as nutritional deficiency and climate change while enhancing productivity as well as the quality of the agricultural products,” he said. “Involving states would lead to an unnecessary delay in the process that has the potential to revolutionise our agricultural scenario.”

“We are great losers in this game. Pest and pathogens can always be dealt with through genetic interventions. Their incidence will only increase further in time with global warming and climate change. These guidelines have gone through three committees. The logical and due process is not being followed,” said Dr Deepak Pental, genetics professor and former vice-chancellor of Delhi University who is also a signatory to the letter.

This, however, isn't the first time that the GEAC has been caught in a row. ThePrint had earlier **reported** on how the government has scuttled GM farming in India as seed makers' proposals for scientific field trials of GM crops had not been taken up for consideration by GEAC, which had even then sought recommendations from states and union territories where the trials were proposed to be undertaken.

(Edited by Arun Prashanth)

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