

SOUTH AGAINST GENETIC ENGINEERING

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To

Sri. Dayanidhi Maran

Union Minister for Textiles

Ministry of Textiles, Udyog Bhavan,

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Subject: Feedback on Report of the National Fibre Policy Sub-Group

Respected *Shri Dayanidhi Maran,*

It is with great interest that we have read the report of the sub group on the National Fibre Policy. We are happy that you have extended the deadline for seeking comments to 5th July 2010. We do believe that a full time line of less than one month from the point of time the policy document was opened up for public discussion, is far from adequate in view of the importance and scale of cotton production in India and in the world, as the sub group's document itself mentions. To quote the document, "Cotton has around 59% share in the raw material consumption basket of the Indian textile industry. Thus, it plays a major role in sustaining the livelihood of an estimated 5.8 mn cotton farmers and about 40-50 mn people engaged in related activities such as cotton processing and trade."

Therefore, the least one can expect from the Ministry of Textiles is to develop a policy document through prior informed and widespread consultations that can shape the thrust of the fibre related raw material and industrial production in the future.

Even as we seek your immediate response to the above, we would like to put forth some crucial and critical points with respect to the section on cotton as mentioned in the policy document.

The policy document makes a sharp remark that the introduction of BT cotton seeds has played a catalytic role in enhancing cotton production in India. This, we are afraid is the whole truth.

Putting the credit for the increase in cotton production at the doorstep of Bt cotton is erroneous. The main reason is the increase of area under cotton is a the factor of Government's decision to raise the minimum assured sale price of cotton from Rs.2000 to Rs.3000 per quintal. As a result the cotton area in AP jumped up from 9 lakh ha. to more than 13 lakh hectares in a period of four years. The irrigated cotton area also increased from 2 lakh ha. to 2.55 lakh ha.

It is extremely unfortunate, that the Fibre Policy has completely ignored the widespread concerns with GE cotton production worldwide. In India there have been a range of social, ethical, ecological and economic issues with respect to Bt Cotton production that have been brought to the notice of the government. Several partners of the South Against Genetic Engineering have initiated independent assessment of the impacts of Bt Cotton cultivation in the southern Indian states. It is extremely relevant to attract your attention to the fact that the five year continuous study done by farmers and scientists with support from Deccan Development Society has reported that **40% of soils in Warangal District of Andhra Pradesh have become toxic reservoir of pathogene like rhizoctomia species. As a consequence, at times mortality of plants has gone upto 40% within five years of Bt Cotton cultivation. This is evident from recurring incidence of dry root rot not just for the Bt cotton but also has become a threat to crops that succeed Bt cotton on the same farms, such as chillies, tomatoes which succeed cotton in normal course.**

The insect pests like mealy bug were eradicated with continuous and strenuous efforts during 1980s and 90s with the help of indigenous hybrids and varieties. The Bt cotton hybrids have invited this pest since 2006 onwards and their infestation has spread leaps and bounds and nothing seems to stop it as it is resistant to all the currently available insecticides.

Our study has confirmed that all Bt cotton hybrids are attracting sucking pests like jassids, aphids, thrips and whitefly in increased intensity which remain active from July to December and are the cause of profuse boll drop due to loss of vigour of crop plants.

Since 2008-2009 we have observed the immense and rapid spread of the 'reddening of leaves' of Bt cotton crop affecting the yield. The menace has hardly affected Non-Bt hybrids which are treated with organic and cattle dung + urine manurial extracts.

In addition to the toxic problems suffered by the soil and the crop, another serious concern is the effect of Bt cotton crop on human health. Serous skin rash has troubled a lot of farm workers engaged for weeding, cotton picking and packing in Bt cotton areas has proved hazardous and expensive.

In addition to the above the Bt cotton stalks left over after completing cotton picking is a live threat to sheep, farm and dairy animals. The toxin which is definitely the product of Bt gene CryIAC etc. left over in Bt Cotton stalks and new leafy sprouts have proved to be active toxin. The farmers who have the centuries old practice of letting in their animals for grazing during February, March, April lost a good number of animals where the animals were let into Bt cotton fields. An area of 150 to 300 acres of cotton fallow is lost in every village now due to toxic stalks and the fields have lost a good source of organic manure as farmers are afraid of the active toxin in Bt cotton fallows.

In a controlled experiment we did with sheep from the area, we found that Bollgard I and II fed sheep started dying from week 6 and by 13 weeks all of them were dead. But non Bt fed sheep did not die at all. This has been clearly documented in the form of film and written documents which we share with you along with this letter.

What is ironic is that at the same time when the National Fibre Policy Document was released it was reported in the national media that makers of the Bt Cotton Seeds have sought to increase the price of their seeds. They now seek for a 400 gms seed packet of the BG1 variety a price of Rs 850 (from the current price of Rs 650), a 30% jump and Rs 1,050 for the BG2 variety (up from Rs 750) which is a jump of 40%. The article in a leading newspaper *Business Standard* states that all the governments in question — Andhra, Maharashtra, Gujarat and Punjab — have declined to do so as it would increase the input costs for farmers and this would trigger a rise in costs in the value chain. Despite such single point profit driven agenda of the Bt Cotton seed companies, the National Fibre Policy document encourages its use and utility. In fact statistics in the article also report that there has been a reduction of the sale of Bt Cotton in the current year due to the failure of the companies to pay remunerative prices. It is important to note these and several other studies with respect to the economic impacts of Bt Cotton crops, in contrast to the cases mentioned in the National Fibre Policy Document. (Ref: *Bt cotton seed firms tell states to end price control* by B.Krishna Mohan, Business Standard, 9th June 2010)

We would like to highlight that the concerns with Bt Cotton are not just within India. There have been objection to the commercial use of Bt Cotton internationally. On Makathini Plains of South Africa, where Bt Cotton was showcased as a huge success for small farmers, today hundreds of farmers are angrily complaining that there is no profit from Bt Cotton. They continue to grow it because they “have no alternative” but to grow cotton. In Indonesia, the famous Monsanto was thrown out of Sulawesi province when its cotton seeds failed miserably forcing the angry farmers to burn all their cotton produce. The company was also fined by the US regulators a hefty penalty of over five million dollars for indulging in *corrupt practices* to sell its Bt cotton seeds in Indonesia. In the West African state of Mali, a huge farmers jury overwhelming came to a verdict asking their government *Never allow Bt cotton into Mali*.

We would also like to share a submission on GM crops (including Bt Cotton) that we have made to the Department Related Parliamentary Standing Committee on Agriculture in March 2010.

In this regard, we request the sub group to immediately remove the positive references to the Bt Cotton in the National Fibre Policy document. We instead seek your support in reviving and promoting indigenous varieties of cotton and its ecological cultivation. For a country with the heritage of the *khadi* weaving as a symbol of seeking freedom from western world-view and domination; we need to respect and promote our own systems of crops and knowledges. Succumbing to the propaganda and short term benefits of crops such as Bt Cotton will only destroy India's leadership in the the cultivation of raw materials to develop fabric and fibre which are the critical elements of the textile industry.



(p v satheesh]