

India stalls on GM crops

As rumours swirl, government says it has not decided whether to allow field trials of transgenic plants.

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Activists met earlier this year in New Delhi to protest field trials of transgenic plants in India.

India's new government says that it has not decided whether to reverse a ban on genetically modified (GM) crops, despite news reports that environment minister Prakash Javadekar plans to block future field trials.

"No final decision has been taken" on permitting such trials, an official with India's Ministry of Environment, Forests and Climate Change told *Nature*. But confusion persists over the future of GM agriculture in India as the administration of Prime Minister Narendra Modi — [who took office in May](#) — begins to make its mark.

Transgenic crops have long been a contentious issue in India. The country's Supreme Court has yet to decide on a public-interest petition, filed in 2005 by activist Aruna Rodrigues, for India to ban the import or manufacture of GM organisms. And there is already a [moratorium on the cultivation of *Bt* brinjal \(aubergine\)](#), a GM crop that carries a gene from the bacterium *Bacillus thuringiensis* (*Bt*). Former environment minister Jairam Ramesh imposed the ban in 2009, overruling a recommendation from India's Genetic Engineering Appraisal Committee (GEAC).

Once again, the GEAC and the environment minister have waded into the GM crop debate. On 18 July, the panel met for the first time in more than a year to consider 15 applications for field trials of GM brinjal, chickpea, cotton, mustard and rice. The panel approved trials on all five crops, sources within the GEAC say, but its decisions have not been officially announced.

The meeting was not without controversy. GEAC member Pushpa Bhargava, director of the Centre for Cellular and Molecular Biology in Hyderabad, disagrees with the panel's decision to permit import of GM soya bean oil and to allow a field trial of *Bt* brinjal. He says that toxicity data on the crop showed "significant statistical differences" between rats fed *Bt* brinjal and those given non-GM feed.

Groups that oppose GM agriculture have been lobbying for the government not to approve new field trials. On 29 July, two such organizations — Swadeshi Jagran Manch (the Forum for National Awakening) and Bharatiya Kisan Sangh (the Indian Farmers' Association) — sent representatives to voice their concerns in a meeting with the environment minister.

In a press release, Swadeshi Jagran Manch said that Javadekar assured the representatives that “the decision about field trials on GM crops has been put on hold”.

A ministry official, however, says that no final decision has been taken and that the government’s official stance is reflected in a 21 July [tweet](#) by Javadekar: “Field trials of GM crops is not a government decision. It is a recommendation of a committee.”

The situation has frustrated India's biotechnology researchers. “If we are afraid to conduct trials, then why are we investing public money in transgenic research?” says Deepak Pental, director of the Centre for Genetic Manipulation of Crop Plants at the University of Delhi South Campus, who helped to develop a transgenic mustard in 2002. “We should withdraw from the sector.”

“We were expecting a change in the situation with the new government, ” says Ram Kaundinya, chairman of the industry-backed Association of Biotechnology-led Enterprises in Hyderabad. Continuing the current stalemate on GM crop development, he says, will bring about “a dark future for the seed and crop biotech industry, and the Indian farmer”.

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