

Written by Shumaila Ahmed

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LAHORE - The agricultural experts have said that developing countries like Pakistan would have to adopt genetically modified/biotech crops in the shortest possible time to ensure food security for rapidly growing population, saying that the future of agriculture growth depends on biotechnology.

The sale of illegal/substandard seeds especially Bt cotton seeds is another important issue that needs to be addressed by the government on priority basis to tap true potential of agricultural productivity in the country, they unanimously said while speaking at extra ordinary general body meeting of Farmers Associates Pakistan (FAP), a representative body of farming community. The event was attended by a large number of farmers from different parts of the country as well as representatives of different seed companies. Media representatives were also present on the occasion.

On the occasion, corn growers urged the government to approve the genetically modified (GM) corn, which is being planted successfully across the globe, for commercial plantation in Pakistan.

The agri scientists were of the view that the sale of fake/substandard seeds was wreaking havoc on the agriculture of Pakistan and there was fear of huge decline in the production of important crops especially cash crop cotton if the government did not check the sale of fake Bt cotton seeds.

Though the mighty fake seed mafia has been playing havoc with the agriculture of the country since long but it was not before the introduction Bt cotton in Pakistan through informal channel that this mafia really got the opportunity it was looking for to penetrate into the market and sell everything in the name of Bt cotton, the experts said. However, this issue can be resolved gradually by developing a professional seed industry in the country, they said, adding that the role of government was critical in this regard.

Dr Iftikhar Ahmad Khan and Dr Iqrar Ahmad from Centre of Agricultural Biochemistry and Biotechnology (University of Agriculture Faisalabad) informed the audience that a study on Bt cotton seeds conducted by UAF revealed that Bt gene expression in most the Bt cotton varieties currently available in the country was very low. According to the study, only 4 out of a total of 52 Bt cotton varieties available in the market had the standard gene expression and that's the reason why the country was unable to fully benefit from this high-yielding technology, they said.

In his presentation, principle scientist at National Institute for Biotechnology and Genetic Engineering (NIBGE) Dr Aftab Bashir said food scarcity will be the biggest issue in near future because of population explosion. Biotechnology is safe and should be fully deployed. Biotech crops are assessed for environmental, food and feed safety by regulatory authorities before being allowed to be grown or sold commercially, Dr Aftab said.

On the occasion, National Biosafety Centre Deputy Director Afzaal Ahmad Naseem, while terming GMOs vital for food security, explained the biosafety laws and their implementation. He informed that the National Bio-safety Committee (NBC), the apex regulatory body responsible for testing and approving GM crops and organisms in the country, reviews the applications submitted by various public and private sectors organisations. He informed the audience that NBC has processed 185 cases so far, adding that NBC usually takes 2-4 years before commercialisation of these crops. The NBC is expected to decide the fate of new varieties of cotton, corn, wheat and sugarcane crops in near future, he said. He said that the government was trying to make Centre a separate department.

FAP President Dr Tariq Bucha was of the view that policy-makers in the country were real obstacle in development of agriculture in the country. He said that devolution caused much damage to the agriculture as after the passage of the 18th Constitutional Amendment everything related to agriculture had been stand still. Nobody in the federal and provincial governments is aware of his duties and responsibilities, he maintained.

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