

## Indian panel advises caution on GMO crops

The government-appointed High Level Committee (HLC) to review environmental laws, while proposing a near complete overhaul of the regulatory system, has sounded a note of caution on genetically modified (GM) food crops.

In a report submitted recently on its review of six laws, the HLC headed by former Cabinet Secretary T.S.R. Subramanian, said the potential consequences of mindless use of science and technology could possibly be illustrated by referring to the potential for medium/ long-term adverse affects through unprepared introduction of GM food crops. While other Ministries naturally would aggressively push for early field trials and induction, the HLC said the role of the Environment Ministry may have to be one of being a Devil's Advocate to advise due caution. It said that Europe does not permit field trials, and that the average Indian farm is of very small size (which could lead to severe adverse impact on biodiversity through gene-flow) and also noted that there are no independent expert agencies in the country, and perhaps the Ministry of Environment may ask for greater assurance in respect of potential adverse effects in the medium and long run.

The HLC takes this aspect of assurance and good faith further in its new proposed law, the Environment Laws (Management) Act (ELMA). The new law prescribes new offences, as also for establishing special environment courts presided over by a session's judge and higher penalties. The proposed new law will have an overriding effect on all other relevant laws.

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