

Brief record of the Emergency Meeting of GEAC held on 07.09.2001

An Emergency Meeting of GEAC was held on 7.9.2001 at 11.00 a.m. under the chairmanship of Shri A.M. Gokhale, Additional Secretary, to consider requests from two voluntary organizations, namely Catholic Relief Services (CRS) and CARE – India, regarding clearing of consignments of soybean oil.

At the outset, the Chairman explained in brief the case. About 1,300 MT of refined soybean oil imported by these two organizations has been held up at Calcutta Port, as the Port Health Authority has requested them to furnish information from a competent authority whether the consignment is a product of GM seeds, and also clearance from the GEAC for these consignments. The Chairman stated that GEAC is required to take a decision on the issues taking into cognizance all possible implications. The Chairman then requested the members to give their views.

Dr. P.K. Gosh informed that about 60% of the soybean grown in USA is genetically modified for herbicide resistance. However, the refined Soya oil is not likely to contain any nucleic acid or protein and therefore does not pose any adverse health effects. Since these organizations are also importing Corn Soya blend, the presence of Starlink corn (Cry PC) in this blend is a possibility. Notwithstanding this, this being transgenic products, approval from GEAC is required.

Dr. R.P. Sharma raised a basic issue as to whether we need to import such food through aid, and that too genetically modified, when our food stocks are in surplus. These voluntary organizations may in fact buy food from India from the monetary aid received instead of importing it. On the limited issue of refined Soya oil, he mentioned that this is not likely to pose any health risks. However, such products should be clearly labeled.

Ms. Dolly Chakraborty mentioned that the GEAC should take science based decisions. It should also take into account whether the product is approved for human consumption in the US. Taking cue from the Starlink case and also press reports about dumping of GM foods as aid material in developing countries, she suggested that decision of GEAC in the present case has to be based on adequate tests and trials, and that this should not become a precedent.

Dr. Balakrishnan stated that it is relevant to know about the details of consignments that are in the pipeline on high seas, so that the GEAC can take a proper decision. Shri Mahapatra informed that details of consignments in pipeline are not known, and their Ministry is planning a comprehensive review of the five such agreements that the Government has entered into for import of food as aid.

Ms. Vibha Puri Das remarked as to what is the public interest compulsion for the GEAC to deviate from its procedure. She informed that she tried to get in touch with the Joint Secretary in the Department of Women and Child Development, Ministry of Human Resource Development, which is nodal Department for CARE, for getting a clearer picture, but could not as she was on leave.

Dr. Bhatnagar made the following points:

-GEAC should not give this signal that it is soft with the foreign aid and stringent with domestic scientific community, on the issue of GM foods.

-Since this oil is being imported for the last few years, its safety aspect is partly established. However, permitting the clearance of the help up consignments would have many other implications.

Dr. Sushil Kumar stated that such aid schemes came into force when the country was food deficient. Now the country has surplus food stocks. However, we should not rush into a decision for stopping such food aid. If the food is of GM origin, there is a need to undertake adequate safety testing. He therefore suggested that in the present case random samples should be taken out and tested for the presence of DNA/protein.

Dr. Balakrishnan mentioned that GEAC is not the appropriate body for deciding on issues relating to food policy. This Committee has to decide on whether to allow this consignment. He cautioned that it is important to know what other shipments are in the pipeline, so that this kind of incident does not recur.

Ms. Shobha Koshy informed that the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare had advised the Port Health Office at Kolkata to seek clearance of GEAC in case of Soya oil imported from U.S.A and Argentina.

Dr. Mahajan, who could not attend the meeting, gave the following comments on the matter:

- The refined Soya oil is not likely to contain proteins, and therefore does not pose any health risks.
- If these consignments are cleared, this should not be used as a precedent and in future, formal applications should be submitted to the GEAC before clearance of such consignments.
- When the country has surplus food stocks, we need not import food, and instead these organizations can buy good material from the country itself.

The Chairman agreed that while the GEAC cannot decide on issues other than genetically modified food, it is desirable to examine the issue in the overall context. He stated that the discussions in this meeting which ranged from technical issues to food policy issues, should pave the way for future decision within the mandate of the Committee. As regards the consignments on the high seas, even the nodal Ministries have no clues.

After the deliberations, the following decisions were taken:

1. The two importing organizations CARE and CRS should have the tests conducted for DNA/ protein in the Soya oil consignments through the Central Food Technological Research Institute (CFTRI), and get back to GEAC with this information.
2. GEAC will seek information through the two nodal departments, namely the Department of Social Justice and Empowerment and Department of Women and Child Development on the following:
 - Whether these particular items are cleared for human consumption and are being consumed in the United States.
 - The details of the consignments in pipeline.

List of participants who attended 28th GEAC meeting held on 07.9.2001

1. Shri A.M. Gokhale Chairman
Additional Secretary
Ministry of Environment & Forests
New Delhi
2. Shri Sushil Kumar Co-Chairman
Director
Central Institute of Medicinal & Aromatic Plants
Lucknow
3. Shri R.C.A Jain
Additional Secretary
Department of Agriculture & Cooperation
Krishi Bhawan, New Delhi-110001
4. Shri Govindan Nair
Joint Secretary
Department of Agriculture & Cooperation
Krishi Bhawan, New Delhi-110001
5. Shri Mangala Rai
Deputy Director General
Indian Council of Agricultural Research
New Delhi
6. Shri K.C. Jain
Asstt. Director General (CC)
Indian Council of Agricultural Research
New Delhi
7. Dr. P.K. Ghosh
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CGO Complex, Lodi Road
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8. Dr. Brajendra Singh
Entomologist
Directorate of Plant Protection
Ministry of Agriculture
N.H. 4, Faridabad
9. Dr. R.P. Sharma, Head
Biotechnology Centre
Indian Agricultural Research Institute
New Delhi

10. Prof. A.K. Bhatnagar
Deptt. of Botany
Delhi University
Delhi
11. Shri A.B. Ramteke
Deputy Drugs Controller of India
Directorate General of Health Services
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12. Prof. Subhash Chander
Centre for Biochemical Engineering
IIT, New Delhi
13. Shri M.M. Ali Khan
Senior Development Officer
Deptt. of Industrial Policy & Promotion
Udyog Bhawan
New Delhi
14. Dr. M. Soundaravadivel
Central Pollution Control Board
Delhi
15. Shri Yogesh Gupta
Deputy Director
National Productivity Council
New Delhi
16. Dr. G.V. Sarat Babu
Additional Director
Ministry of Environment & Forests
New Delhi
17. Dr. Sujata Arora
Deputy Director
Ministry of Environment & Forests
New Delhi
18. Ms. Madhu Gupta
Research Assistant
Ministry of Environment & Forests
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