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India puts on hold first GM food crop

India has deferred the commercial cultivation of what would have been its first genetically modified (GM) vegetable crop due to safety concerns.

The cultivation of the BT brinjal aubergine variety has divided opinion

Environment Minister Jairam Ramesh said more studies were needed to ensure genetically modified aubergines were safe for consumers and the environment.

The GM vegetable has undergone field trials since 2008 and received approval from government scientists in 2009.

But there has been a heated public row over the cultivation of the GM crop.

The BBC's Geeta Pandey, who was at the news conference in Delhi, says Mr Ramesh's decision has put any cultivation of GM vegetables in India on hold indefinitely.

'Difficult decision'

"Public sentiment is negative. It is my duty to adopt a cautious, precautionary, principle-based approach," Mr Ramesh said.

He said the moratorium on growing BT brinjal - as the variety of aubergine is known in India - would remain in place until tests were carried out "to the satisfaction of both the public and professionals".

> **"The decision is responsible to science and responsive to society"**
>
> Environment Minister Jairam Ramesh

India in battle over GM aubergine

The minister said "independent scientific studies" were needed to establish "the safety of the product from the point of view of its long-term impact on human health and environment".

Mr Ramesh said it was "a difficult decision to make" since he had to "balance science and society".

"The decision is responsible to science and responsive to society," he said.

India is the largest producer of aubergines in the world and grows more than 4,000 varieties.

Indian seed company Mahyco - partner of US multinational corporation Monsanto - which has developed BT brinjal, says the GM vegetable is more resistant to natural pests.

But anti-GM groups say there are serious health concerns and they allege that consumption of GM crops can even cause cancer.

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Aziz Merchant, Mumbai, India

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The government-controlled Genetic Engineering Approval Committee (GEAC) approved BT brinjal for commercial cultivation in October 2009.

Following an uproar from farmers and anti-GM activists, the environment minister held a series of national consultation meetings across India.

Several of the aubergine-growing Indian states have already said they were opposed to BT brinjal.

India allowed the use of genetically modified seeds for cotton in 2002.

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