

More time needed to formulate biosafety rules: official

By Our Reporter

ISLAMABAD, Aug 24: Pakistan needs more time and aggressive consultations before notifying biosafety rules due to their far-reaching impact on its biodiversity and ecology.

This was the crux of the media briefing made by Inspector General Forests Bashir Ahmad Wani to a group of mediapersons on biosafety rules at the ministry of environment here on Tuesday.

Responding to a barrage of questions asked by the mediapersons, Mr Wani defended that the ministry was not too late and was taking everybody into account on the issue so that in the end comprehensive biosafety rules could be formulated.

"Since the biosafety rules definitely will have long-term impact on general public health and environment of the

country, the ministry is taking its time before approving them," he said.

It's worth-mentioning here that the environment ministry has come under fire for not formulating biosafety rules though it had signed the Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety (CPB) back in June 4, 2001.

The Cartagena Protocol on Biodiversity is a protocol under the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), which was adopted in January 2000, and entered into force on 11 September 2003. The aim of the protocol is to control the trans-boundary movement of living genetically modified organisms (LMOs) and the adverse effects their release into the environment might have on the countries ecosystems.

The protocol refers directly to the precautionary principles, and establishes an Advance Informed Agreement (AIA) procedure for import of LMOs. A biosafety clearing house will be used by parties to exchange information, including on implementation issues.

"It is not a matter of few experts who may agree that Pakistan should formulate biosafety rules at the earliest, instead the entire population of the country because at the end it is the general public who will be at the receiving end," Mr Wani underlined.

In response to a question, Mr Wani accepted: "We are technically on weak grounds and lack capacity to handle the issue related to the Genetically Modified Organisms (GMOs)."

"If tomorrow we come up with

biosafety rules and allow a certain country to export GMOs to Pakistan, we will not be able to ascertain whether that GMO is beneficial to our biodiversity or not," Mr Wani further added.

India, which is cited as an example for Pakistan being far ahead on biosafety rules had already started feeling negative repercussions of GMOs it has had experienced, he said. Therefore, it (biosafety rules) is not an easy path to tread on and we would take some time to formulate them after taking into account each and every quarter concerned, he said.

At present, the ministry of environment is seeking views of a number of stakeholders, ministries, organizations and provincial departments concerned on biosafety rules, he said.

The ministry of agriculture, one of the major stakeholders in the biosafety rules, is yet to respond to the environment ministry's draft rules the latter has sent to the former.

Similarly, the provincial governments have also requested more time to come up with their points of view on biosafety rules considering their far-reaching impact on biodiversity.

The process of public scrutiny of biosafety rules, though long, is justified in view of the genuine fear about the implications of Genetically Modified Organisms (GMOs) to human health and safety, Mr Wani explained to the mediapersons.

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The process of public scrutiny of biosafety rules, though long, is justified in view of the genuine fear about the implications of Genetically Modified Organisms (GMOs) to human health and safety, Mr Wani explained to the mediapersons.

"Yes, a number of quarters, who have vested interest in the formulation of biosafety rules, are pushing the min-

istry through different corners so that the laws could be hurriedly made."

However, he reiterated that the ministry was not under any pressure and will take every body concerned on board to formulate biosafety laws.

It may be added here that the protocol was opened for signature at the United Nations Office at Nairobi by the US and regional economic integration organizations from May 15-26, 2000, and remained open for signature at United Nations Headquarters in New York till 4 June 2001. By that date the protocol had received 103 signatures.

Pakistan has signed it on June 4, 2001. Most of the EU Asian, Latin American and African countries are parties to the protocol, but so far the United State has not ratified the CBD.