

## Biosafety protocol

For the first time ever, an international framework has been set up to regulate trade in genetically modified (GM) products. Following a week of intense negotiations in Montreal, Canada, delegates from over 140 countries framed rules which will allow countries to ban the import of GM seeds, microbes, animals and crops that they believe are harmful to their environment. The pact also stipulates that all GM food must bear the label 'may contain' before they are shipped to other countries.

The term 'genetically modified' refers to plants and animals containing genes transferred from other species to produce certain characteristics, such as resistance to specific pests and herbicides. But fears about GM organisms remain. For instance, genes that make crops herbicide-resistant could spread by pollination to weak relatives, creating 'super-weeds'. Or genes injected in fish, to make them grow faster, might affect the native fish population in their efforts to find food or mates. Some important features of the new protocol include:

- GM products will bear the label 'may contain'.
- Creation of a biosafety 'clearing house' where countries will share information about GM organisms (GMOs) from the importing nation – a procedure known as advance informed agreement for initial shipment of GMOs intended for release into the environment.
- The Precautionary Principle has been adopted. A country can ban a GM product even in the absence of scientific data on its harmful effects.

Many analysts, however, feel that the pact has certain limitations, such as:

- Labelling will not give specific details about the GM products.
- Plants and animal products, once processed, will not bear the label, e.g. corn-flakes.
- The pact will not override other international agreements. Any dispute will be reviewed by the World Trade Organization.
- GM organisms used in the pharmaceutical industry have been exempted from the protocol.
- Deals only with the setting-up of rules for trade in GM products. Does not dwell on the health impact of GM food on humans.

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