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Thais lift ban on GMO planting, will regulate trials

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Reuters

BANGKOK — Thailand has lifted a three-year ban on planting genetically modified organisms (GMOs) by allowing the crops to grow in open-field trials with non-GMO plants, Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra said on Saturday.

The decision, made by Thaksin at a Friday meeting on biotech policies, upset anti-GMO activists who said Thailand had been pressured by U.S. seeds firms before the completion of negotiations on a bilateral free trade agreement.

"We are technologically capable of developing GMOs," Thaksin said in his weekly radio address. "If we don't start now, we will miss this scientific train and lose out in the world."

The debate surrounding biotech grains has intensified worldwide, with advocates saying they could lead to a more secure future for food, while opponents say they could produce new toxins and allergens, affecting the health of consumers.

Thaksin, who chaired the national biotechnology policy board on Friday, decided to allow the co-existence of GM and non-GM crops in Thailand.

The decision, due for formal cabinet approval on Tuesday, meant the government would later pass laws to regulate planting areas for GM crops, allow the import of GM seeds and order products containing GMOs to have explicit labels, he said.

Planting of GM crops is now done in government laboratories for papayas, chiles, and eggplants, while imports of genetically modified soybeans and maize for animal feedstock and other commercial uses are legal, biotech officials said.

The other two options proposed by the board but rejected by Thaksin were to ban GMOs completely or to freely promote them in Thailand.

Anti-GMO advocates said by adopting the field-trial of genetically modified crops, Thailand was heading towards freely promoting GMOs as the government had no measures to prevent GM crops from contaminating non-GMOs.

"Look at the fields of GM papayas by the agriculture ministry that claims to have excellent security, lots of these papayas are also being grown by farmers in the surrounding areas," said Witoon Lianchamroon of state-funded BioThai, a biotech policy study group.

"Many more non-GMO crops would be contaminated with GMOs after these open-field trials have been promoted. What would happen to our people's health," Witoon said. Others say the

government's reversal on GMO policy showed it was bowing to pressure from Washington during free trade talks that have put GMOs on the agenda.

Thaksin denied this, but said the United States was the "most technologically advanced on GMOs" and that Thailand should not be afraid to explore the technology further.

"Their genetically modified vegetable and fruits are very resistant to diseases and give high yields, so people have options to choose from," Thaksin said in his radio speech.

The United States is the world's leading producer of biotech crops, growing billions of bushels of genetically modified soybeans, corn and cotton each year.