Confined GM trials with adequate safeguards is the way forward

By Mayank Aggarwal

The environment ministry has removed the tag of ‘speed-breaker’ that it had earned during the UPA regime.

How will you ensure that?

We have not accepted it (self-certification) as yet. T.S.R. Subramanian committee has given 55 major recommendations but today I can’t say which is accepted and which is not accepted. We still need our due diligence by 15 March on TSR committee recommendations and others also—or by March-end.

It has also been alleged that your ministry is being micromanaged from the office of Prime Minister Narendra Modi? How do you respond to that?

Absolutely not. This is outrageous. What was the mantra of Modi government—more governance and less government—we are doing it. We are taking policy-based decisions and making process transparent. So, it becomes nearly an automatic route. That is how we want to go ahead and take major policy decisions in many areas which are still not decided upon.

There are also a lot of important pending decisions such as the appointment of Central Pollution Control Board (CPCB) chairman or the policy of violate/inviolate forest areas, which have not seen much movement till now. What is happening on that front?

CPCB appointment is in the process and I think within next two months we will have a full fledged CPCB chairman in place. As far as violate-inviolates is concerned, brainstorming is on and the process is near completion and after it is competed, we will take a decision—because these are major policy changes. And we have already fast-tracked eco-sensitive zones proposals.

It has been alleged that environment ministry is working to dilute the Forest Rights Act (FRA). What do you have to say about it?

Absolutely not. What is FRA? Basically we fought for it...in 1980 it was Mahanarashtra BIP’s (Bharatiya Janata Party’s) application in Supreme Court which brought these forest rights embedded. There are three essential rights. First is to live where they are living... though they don’t own the land to till the land so the plots are not owned with demarcation and third right is for collection and returning of the minor forest produce... so these are the three rights applicable to forest dwellers that are staying in forests for more than three generations. There is a separate ministry—a ministry for tribal affairs. They will take a final decision. We are not doing away or diluting anything. This was the canard spread.

On issue of the genetically modified crops, you have been having regular meetings with persuaded anti-GM group. Have you achieved any breakthrough?

Now, I think everyone is on board. Scientific evaluation and confined trials with adequate safeguards is the way forward. We can’t play with safety and that is what we are doing. Open field trials are confined trials. We have so many safeguards that it is completely isolated experiment on the field. We have already discussed in detail with anybody sharing any concern and now I think with adequate safeguards put in place, there is not much opposition.

What is your vision and dream for environment ministry?

My dream for this ministry is that this ministry was known as speed-breaker ministry and that tag has gone now. It has become a facilitating ministry and our pace, therefore, now has been converted. Now it is development without destruction—zero effect, zero defect. Second, our ministry’s image was as if it was a licence-permit quota raj ministry. I want to convert it into a people-centric ministry. Third, people movement, then only we can conserve environment.

My dream projects are for clean air, clean water, clean energy and people’s participation for environment. The national air quality programme that we had launched will now soon be functional which will show current health of each city.

We want to do this in 20 cities, five anti-GM cities.

In 2013, the Supreme Court had ordered for relocation of lions from Gujarat to Madhya Pradesh. In what way are you progressing on this issue?

The matter is sub-judice. We are not intervening in court matters.

The environment ministry was also planning to launch a forest satelite. Have you finalized anything as yet?

We are already in discussions with the Indian Space Research Organisation. It is not only for forests but coast, environment—there are many things which can be tapped through satellite mechanism. Let us see how ideas take shape.