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Asia

GM crops cause 'breakdown' in Indian farming systems

By Geoffrey Lean, Environment Editor

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Genetically modified crops have helped cause a "complete breakdown" in farming systems in India, an authoritative new study suggests.

The study threatens to deal a fatal blow to probably the most powerful argument left in the biotech industry's armoury, that it can help to bring prosperity to the Third World.

Professor Glenn Davis Stone, professor of anthropology and environmental studies at Washington University in St Louis, Missouri, has spent more than 40 weeks on the ground in the biotech industry's prime Developing World showcase, the Warangal district of the Indian state of Andhra Pradesh.

The industry claims that local farmers have adopted GM cotton faster than any other agriculture technology in history. It argued at the prestigious Biovision conference in Lyon this month that the rapid spread proves that the technology is working for farmers.

Professor Stone's study, published in the February issue of the journal Current Anthropology, demolishes this argument. Extensive interviews with the farmers proved that they are plumping for the GM seeds because they are new, hyped and locally fashionable, without having time to see if they produce better crops.

"There is a rapidity of change that farmers just can't keep up with," he says. "They aren't able to digest new technologies as they come along."

He adds that the rapid uptake "reflects the complete breakdown in the cotton cultivation system".

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