

Govt dismisses criticism of GMO regulation

The Agriculture Ministry has defended its decision to allow farmers to grow genetically modified organisms (GMO) against the claims of activists who says that such a policy could damage the environment and disadvantage farmers. The ministry said there were no problems with the 2011 regulation on testing, assessing and planting crop varieties – issued on Oct. 10 – that gave farmers the green light to grow genetically modified crops.

Activists from several NGOs have blasted the regulation, saying that it violates the 2009 Environmental Law, threatened the ecosystem and would have negative impacts on local farmers. Agriculture Ministry researcher Muhammad Herman said on Thursday that the team of experts that formulated the regulation was not stupid enough to make a regulation that contradicted other laws.

“The regulation is not really that different from the previous regulation. What are [the NGOs] protesting about?” Herman, who was also on the regulation’s formulating team, said.

He added that among the new policies in the regulation was the approval of multilocation tests of genetically modified crops while simultaneously running environmental safety tests and the exemption of multilocation tests on genetically modified crop varieties that had been cultivated before.

He questioned the NGOs’ argument that the regulation would be bad for farmers as they were the ones who asked for a clear regulation on GMOs.

He further argued that GMOs were similar to other products. For example, he said, if there was a pest-resistant corn and a herbicide-resistant corn, it would be best to combine the two varieties into one product.

“The NGOs should reread the regulation provisions in order to better understand which part of the regulation is contentious.”

The protesting NGOs include the Indonesian Center for Environmental Law and the Alliance for Prosperous Villages. They cited that GMOs could damage the environment as they could change local ecosystems and could contaminate organic crops.

On the same occasion, biotechnology expert Antonius Suwanto explained that there was no firm basis to claim that GMOs were unsafe.

“GMOs are not always harmful, besides through genetic engineering, the genetics of living things are spontaneously changing by themselves, through such things as radiation, chemicals, as well as sexual reproduction,” Antonius said.

The criticism also touched upon the purpose of the regulation’s issuance, which, according to the NGOs, only served business interests rather than tackled the country’s imminent agricultural problems.

Herman said that the new regulation issuance’s purpose was simply to revise the old regulation by adding more provisions.

“The purpose of GMO technology cultivation in the future will depend on the crop varieties to which it is applied. It could be used to cultivate food crops or for other agriculture crops,” he said.

Herman said that the GMOs currently being considered for licenses at the Agriculture Ministry were six variety of corn and two varieties of soybean.

“Both [GMO crop varieties] are undergoing the licensing process following private companies’ proposals, while the government has proposed sugarcane,” he said. (rpt)