

IN CONFIDENCE**GM CROPS IN AUSTRALIA****QUESTION**

What is the benefit of genetically modified (GM) crops; and what measures does Australia have in place to ensure the safety of GM crops and GM food?

TALKING POINTS

- Biotechnology, including the development of GM crops, can assist in increasing sustainable agricultural productivity in the face of climate change, resource constraints and the pressures of providing a secure food supply both domestically and internationally.
- Foods from approved GM crops have been consumed since GM crops were first grown commercially in six countries in 1996, including the United States.
- ABARE released two reports in 2008 which found that GM technology is delivering significant cost savings to farmers in other countries.
- Australian growers could lose significant market share if their access to GM technology is restricted.
- GM crops can benefit the environment by changing the way farmers manage their crops. For example, GM cotton farmers have been able to reduce insecticide use.
- The existing national framework for the management and regulation of GM crops and food includes careful scientific assessment of human health and environmental risks. The intentional release of a GMO into the Australian environment such as commercial release of a GM crop, must be licensed by the Gene Technology Regulator, an independent statutory office holder within the Health portfolio. The license will only be issued if risks can be managed so as to protect the health and safety of people and the environment

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- GM food labelling requirements enable consumers to make informed choices about what they eat.
- On 29 November 2008 COAG agreed to the Australia New Zealand Food Regulation Ministerial Council commissioning an independent review of food labelling laws and policy. GM labelling has been raised as an issue by stakeholders during the review, which is expected to report to governments in December 2010.

BACKGROUND

- Divisions remain within the farming and general community over the benefits of and the safety of GM foods. Concerns with GM crops and food often relate to: the adequacy of Australia's regulatory and food labelling systems; environmental impacts, including weediness and negative effect on bees; loss of market access; impact on organic crop production; legal liability to non-GM farmers and technology providers; and the capture of the Australian agricultural sector by multi-nationals.
- The Minister for Health and Ageing has the lead Australian Government responsibility for the regulation of genetically modified organisms (GMOs) and GM foods.
- Gene technology, including GM crops, is regulated under a nationally consistent regulatory scheme by the Gene Technology Regulator in accordance with *the Gene Technology Act 2000*. The Gene Technology Regulator has approved commercial release of several varieties of cotton, canola, carnations and a rose; and has issued licences for field trials of crops as diverse as sugarcane, wheat and barley, pineapple, white clover and grapevines, as well as the ornamental plant, torenia.
- Decisions on whether to allow GM crop production in part or all of a state or territory are a matter for that jurisdiction. In 2003 the regulator issued commercial release licences after assessing two applications for GM canola. All state and territory governments, except Queensland and the Northern Territory, subsequently enacted moratorium legislation to delay the commercial production of GM canola until marketing considerations had been addressed. The independent reviews of the Victorian and New South Wales moratoriums in 2007 found that earlier concerns about market access, economic impact and segregation had largely been resolved since the moratoria were first put in place, and GM canola can now be produced

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commercially in those states. In 2009 the Western Australian Government announced that GM canola could be grown commercially in that state from 2010 onwards, following a trial in 2009.

- Tasmania has a moratorium on the commercial release of GMOs until 2014. South Australia's moratorium on GM food crops will continue until at least 2014.
- Food Standards Australia New Zealand (FSANZ) administers the regulation and labelling of GM foods and ingredients and assesses all GM foods on a case by case basis. FSANZ approval applies to food produced domestically or imported for human consumption. More than 40 GM foods have been approved and can be imported into and sold in Australia. FSANZ will not approve a GM food for sale or use if there is evidence it would pose public health and safety concerns.
- The FSANZ risk assessment process for GM foods was recently peer reviewed. The review report provided a comprehensive analysis of the current FSANZ approach to GM food safety assessments, benchmarked against international best practice in the area.
- GM food labelling requirements enable consumers to make informed choices about what they eat. GM foods are required to be labelled in accordance with the Australia New Zealand Food Standards Code. Food containing novel DNA and/or novel protein must be labelled 'genetically modified'. In addition, where GM food has altered characteristics from its non GM counterpart it must be labelled even if novel DNA or protein is not present. The Code allows a food to contain up to 10g/kg (1%) unintended new genetic material and/or protein per ingredient without being labelled but only where the manufacturer has actively sought to avoid using GM food or ingredients.
- Labelling of GM food in Australia has been raised as an issue by stakeholders during the independent review of food labelling laws and policy chaired by Dr Neal Blewett AC. The final report of the Review Panel is expected to be

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provided to Government through the Australia and New Zealand Food Regulation Ministerial Council in December 2010 and to COAG in early 2011.

- Scientific evidence indicates that feeding GM plant material to livestock does not affect the nutritional value or safety of the meat, milk and eggs derived from those animals. As these food products are not genetically modified, they are not required to be labelled as GM.
- In 2010, nearly 133,330 hectares (ha) of GM canola was planted in Australia. This represents over 8 per cent of the total canola crop in Australia. This is the third year GM canola can be grown commercially in NSW and Victoria, where 24,040 ha and 36,500 ha were planted, respectively. It is the first year GM canola can be grown commercially in Western Australia (72,790 ha planted).
- From 2009 the Australian oilseeds industry has established two national canola standards: a general standard (CSO1) that may contain licensed GM and/or conventional canola; and a standard for non-GM canola only (CSO1-A), that may contain up to 0.9 per cent adventitious presence of material from licensed GM crops. Industry is using buffer zones to assist with segregation of GM and non-GM crops, and has produced guidelines for clean-down of harvesting equipment.
- In May 2009, nine grains organisations from Australia, Canada and the United States issued a joint statement indicating their intention to work toward the synchronised commercialisation of GM wheat. While this intention may be aimed at minimising market disruptions, any GM crop that is going to be commercialised in Australia must first be assessed and licensed by the Gene Technology Regulator. Markets must then be identified for the product for it to be viable.

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Date Updated: 22 September 2010
Contact Officer: Tamara Dadswell
Telephone: s. 47F(1)
SES Clearing Officer: Matthew Worrell
Telephone: s. 47F(1)
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