

## Australian policies on genetically modified (GM) crops and food

### KEY POINTS

- The national framework for management and regulation of GM crops and food in Australia, includes careful scientific assessment of human health and environmental risks.
- The Australian Government considers that gene technology can play an important part in helping to deal with emerging challenges, including those arising from climate change, pressure on global food supplies and the management of pests and diseases. This technology can also benefit the environment, through reduced chemical use, and consumers, through development of products with greater health benefits.
- The regulation of genetically modified organisms (GMOs) and genetically modified (GM) food in Australia is achieved through an integrated legislative framework which includes the Gene Technology Regulator (the Regulator) and Food Standards Australia New Zealand (FSANZ) and corresponding state and territory legislation.
- The legislative framework operates on three levels: GM crops are not released to farmers unless they have been assessed as safe for human health and the environment; GM foods are not approved for sale unless they have been assessed as safe; and foods that are approved must be labelled in accordance with the requirements of the Australia New Zealand Food Standards Code to enable consumers to make informed choices

### BACKGROUND

#### Regulation of GM crops and food

The intentional release of a GM crop into the Australian environment must be licensed by the Gene Technology Regulator, an independent statutory office holder responsible for administering and enforcing the *Gene Technology Act 2000*. The object of the Act is, "to protect the health and safety of people, and to protect the environment, by identifying risks posed by or as a result of gene technology, and by managing those risks through regulating certain dealings with GMOs". A license will only be issued if risks can be managed so as to protect the health and safety of people and the environment.

Assessment of GMOs intended for release into the environment involves analysis of data supplied by the applicant (e.g. Monsanto, CSIRO) and a comprehensive review by the Regulator of independent, peer reviewed scientific literature.

To date the Regulator has approved the commercial release of several varieties of cotton, canola, carnations and a rose; and has issued licences for field trials of crops as diverse as banana, sugarcane, wheat and barley, pineapple, papaya, white clover and grapevines, as well as the ornamental plant, torenia.

FSANZ administers the regulation and labelling of GM foods and ingredients and assesses all GM foods for human consumption on a case by case basis. All GM foods intended for sale in Australia, whether grown in Australia or not, are subject to a pre market safety assessment by FSANZ, an independent statutory authority in the Health portfolio responsible for food regulation. FSANZ will not approve a GM food for sale if there is any evidence that the food could pose any public health or safety concerns.

The Australia New Zealand Food Standards Code requires that food (including ingredients, food additives and processing aids) derived from GM crops be labelled as GM if any genetic material and/or protein other than that normally present in the food is contained in the final product. This labelling requirement ensures consumers are advised where there is GM content and can make informed choices.

The Code allows a food to contain up to 10g/kg (1 per cent) 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. In addition, food prepared for immediate consumption, for example at restaurants and through vending machines, is not required to be labelled.

#### GM wheat

Greenpeace have been campaigning in Australia to highlight what it views as imminent commercial release of GM wheat.

- Media reports that in May 2011, Greenpeace lodged an FOI request with CSIRO for all documents relating to nutritional testing CSIRO had conducted, or will conduct, on pigs, rats or humans, with food produced using GM. Having identified 1042 related documents, CSIRO denied the request, citing the 539 hours required to process them as unreasonably resource intensive and not in the public interest. CSIRO suggested the request be modified to exclude documents relating to a project being undertaken on a commercial footing.
- In July 2011, Greenpeace Australia Pacific released *Australia's wheat scandal*, a report calling for government to ban field trials of GM wheat.
- Two Greenpeace activists have been charged in relation to vandalism causing damage valued at \$300,000 to a GM wheat trial crop on a CSIRO site in Canberra on 14 July 2011.

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GM wheat is not grown commercially in Australia nor have there been any applications submitted to the Regulator to grow GM wheat commercially. GM wheat is not commercially grown anywhere in the world. However, since 2005 the Regulator has approved 11 small scale GM wheat research trials after conducting a rigorous science-based risk assessment and extensive consultation.

The trials approved in Australia are for research purposes only and are subject to strict containment conditions, including a requirement to monitor the trial sites after harvest and destroy any remaining material. There has been no breach of containment for any GM wheat trials and wheat from these trials cannot enter the human or animal food supplies. Each trial is limited in size and duration and current licences have

established trial sites ranging in size from 0.1 to 2 hectares per year for up to five years.

CSIRO's work in GM wheat and barley is primarily directed at increasing yield, reducing fertiliser use (impacting positively on greenhouse gas emissions) and enhancing health benefits (higher resistant starch), all traits that can contribute to sustainable food supply. This particular research does not involve inserting genes from one organism into another, rather existing genes are "silenced" or "turned off" in the plant to encourage or halt the trait under consideration.

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