

**IN CONFIDENCE**  
**GENETICALLY MODIFIED CROPS IN AUSTRALIA**

**QUESTION**

**What is the Government response to reports that companies promoting the use of genetically modified crops taking over Australian wheat research; and what measures will the government implement to ensure safety of Australian crops from genetically modified grains and other foods?**

**TALKING POINTS**

- In Australia gene technology is regulated under a nationally consistent regulatory scheme by the Gene Technology Regulator in accordance with the *Gene Technology Act 2000*. The 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 genetically modified crop production in part or all of a state or territory are a matter for that jurisdiction.
- In 2010, nearly 133,330 hectares of genetically modified canola was planted in Australia. This is the third year genetically modified canola could be grown commercially in New South Wales (24,040 hectares) and Victoria (36,500 hectares). It is the first year genetically modified canola could be grown commercially in Western Australia (72,790 hectares).
- Tasmania has a moratorium on the commercial release of genetically modified organisms until 2014. In 2008 the South Australian government extended its moratorium on genetically modified food crops indefinitely.
- Food Standards Australia New Zealand administers the regulation and labelling of genetically modified foods and ingredients and assesses all genetically modified foods for human consumption on a case by case basis.

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Food Standards Australia New Zealand compares the genetically modified food with a similar, commonly eaten non-genetically modified food from a molecular, toxicological, nutritional and compositional point of view. If the genetic modification causes an adverse effect, such as increasing a food's allergenicity or toxicity, it will not be approved. The safety assessment protocol used by Food Standards Australia New Zealand for genetically modified foods is based on internationally recognised principles for assessing the safety of whole foods.

- More than 40 genetically modified foods have been approved. Food Standards Australia New Zealand will not approve a genetically modified food for sale or use if there is evidence it would pose public health and safety concerns.
- Genetically modified foods are required to be labelled in accordance with the Australia New Zealand Food Standards Code, enabling consumers to make informed choices about what they eat.
- Scientific evidence indicates that feeding genetically modified 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 genetically modified.

**FURTHER TALKING POINTS**

- Biotechnology, including the development of genetically modified crops, can assist in increasing agricultural productivity in the face of climate change, resource constraints and the pressures of providing a secure food supply.
- Foods from approved genetically modified crops have been consumed since genetically modified crops were first grown commercially in six countries in 1996, including the United States.

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- ABARE released two reports in 2008 which found that genetic modification of crops is delivering significant cost savings to farmers in other countries.
- Australian growers could lose significant market share if their access to genetically modified crop technology is restricted.
- Genetically modified crops can benefit the environment by changing the way farmers manage their crops.
- The intentional release of a genetically modified organism into the Australian environment, such as a genetically modified 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.

**BACKGROUND**

- Concerns with genetically modified crops and food raised by the farming and general community often relate to: the adequacy of Australia's regulatory and food labelling systems; environmental impacts, loss of market access; impact on organic crop production; legal liability to farmers of non-genetically modified crops and technology providers; and the capture of the Australian agricultural sector by multi-nationals.
- The Minister for Health and Ageing, the Hon. Nicola Roxon MP has the lead Australian Government responsibility for the regulation of genetically modified organisms and genetically modified foods.

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**IN CONFIDENCE****FURTHER INFORMATION – NOT FOR PUBLIC RELEASE**

In late September 2010 Greenpeace and the media reported trace amounts of genetically modified soy and corn had been found in S-26 Soy infant formula, despite the product not being labelled as containing genetically modified ingredients. Following these reports, Senator Siewert and Senator Xenophon moved to discuss the labelling of genetically modified foods when the Senate next sits (25 October 2010).

On 27 October 2010 the Herald Sun reported that a Greenpeace report would be released on *Spliced Bread: the Threat of Genetically Engineered Wheat in Australia*. The report is embargoed until 7:30pm 27 October 2010. According to press reports, Greenpeace claims genetic modification companies have 'taken over' Australian wheat research; grain handlers wield too much power to make decisions about genetically modified wheat; genetically modified crops perform no better than conventional ones; Australian wheat growers will lose market share by surrendering their non genetically modified status; and studies on the long-term effects of genetically modified foods on animals show adverse health effects. Greenpeace are also concerned at the lack of testing on humans.

InterGrain Pty Ltd evolved from the wheat and barley breeding programs which were previously conducted out of the Department of Agriculture and Food Western Australia, in partnership with the Grains Research & Development Corporation. Monsanto acquired a 19.9 per cent stake in InterGrain in August 2010.

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