

## Key Estimates Brief

### GENETICALLY MODIFIED (GM) CROPS AND FOOD IN AUSTRALIA

#### Question

What measures has the government implemented to ensure genetically modified crops and food are safe?

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#### Key Message

The national framework for management and regulation of GM crops and food, includes careful scientific assessment of human health and environmental risks.

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#### Talking Points

- The regulation of genetically modified organisms and genetically modified food in Australia is achieved through an integrated legislative framework which requires that: genetically modified crops are not released to farmers unless they have been assessed as safe for human health and the environment; genetically modified foods are not approved for sale unless they have been assessed as safe; foods that are approved must be labelled to allow consumer choice.
- The intentional release of a genetically modified 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 license will only be issued if risks can be managed so as to protect the health and safety of people and the environment.
- Decisions on whether to allow genetically modified crop production in part or all of a state or territory are a matter for that jurisdiction.
- 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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#### Sensitivity

- There have been several press reports since December 2010 that a farmer in Western Australia, Mr Steve Marsh, has had 70 per cent of his farm lose its organic certification as a result of genetically modified canola being present on it.
- On 26 September 2009 Greenpeace alleged it had found traces of GM soy and corn in the popular infant formula S-26, despite it not being labelled as containing GM ingredients.

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SES Lead: Mr Allen Grant, APD  
Phone: s. 47F(1)  
SES Support: Mr Matthew Worrell  
Phone: s. 47F(1)

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### Background

#### Regulation of GM crops and Food

- The Minister for Health and Ageing has the lead Australian Government responsibility for the regulation of genetically modified organisms and genetically modified foods.
- The Gene Technology 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 sugarcane, wheat and barley, pineapple, white clover and grapevines, as well as the ornamental plant, torenia.
- All GM foods intended for sale in Australia and New Zealand are subject to a pre-market safety assessment by Food Standards Australia New Zealand (FSANZ) and approval by the FSANZ Board. The Australia and New Zealand Food Regulation Ministerial Council is then notified of the Board's decision. More than 40 GM foods have been approved to date.
- 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.
- 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.

#### GM Crops in Australia

- Decisions on whether to allow GM production in part or all of a state or territory are a matter for that jurisdiction.
- Tasmania has a moratorium on the commercial release of GMOs until 2014. In 2008 the South Australian Government extended its moratorium on GM food crops indefinitely.
- Varieties of GM cotton have been grown in Australia since 1996 and now make up around 95 per cent of the crop.
- Agrifood Awareness Australia report that in 2010 around 133,300 hectares of GM canola have been planted in NSW, Victoria and WA.
- The sugar and wheat industry are undertaking field trials of genetically modified varieties but are some years (at least seven to eight) away from commercialisation.

#### Presence of genetically modified canola on an organic farm

- There have been reports that a farmer in Western Australia, Mr Steve Marsh, has had 70 per cent of his farm lose its organic certification as a result of genetically modified canola being present on it. It is believed the canola blew in from a neighbouring property over 1 km away, after being swathed and awaiting harvest.
- On 6 January 2011 the Countryman reported Western Australia Agriculture Minister, Terry Redman, as saying he wanted to work with industry to help resolve the issue. Whilst industry already has measures in place to ensure coexistence between conventional and genetically modified crops, Mr Redman stated "we need to consider greater buffering differences with organic farmers".
- The unintended presence of material from licensed GM crops is not a safety matter. When the Gene Technology Regulator licensed the two types of GM

SES Lead: Mr Allen Grant, APD  
 Phone: s. 47F(1)  
 SES Support Mr Matthew Worrell  
 Phone s. 47F(1)

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canola (Roundup Ready and InVigor) in 2003, the Regulator concluded GM canola was as safe as conventional canola.

GM soy and corn in infant formula

- On 26 September 2010 Greenpeace alleged it had found traces of GM soy and corn in the popular infant formula S-26, despite the product not being labelled as containing GM ingredients.
- Media reports indicate the test results showed less than 0.1 per cent of GM content. Wyeth Nutrition, the manufacturer, released a statement that any contamination was adventitious as the company has a policy of not using GM ingredients.

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Phone s. 47F(1)