

GENETICALLY MODIFIED WHEAT FIELD TRIALS

Current Issue:

- Greenpeace destroys GM wheat field trials at CSIRO Canberra (ABC news 14/07/11, Canberra times online 14/07/11, Greepeace media release 14/07/11)

Brief talking points:

- I am aware of media reports claiming that Greenpeace activists have destroyed GM wheat field trials grown by CSIRO in Canberra.
- This field trial was approved by the Gene Technology Regulator in 2009 after conducting a rigorous science-based risk assessment and extensive consultation.
- These trials are not secret - information about them, including trial locations, has been available on the Regulator's website since 2009.
- 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.
- I am advised that this incident is being investigated by the Gene Technology Regulator and the police.

Key Facts:

- GM wheat trials approved since 2005 are very small and are strictly for research purposes only.
- The trials are subject to strict containment conditions, including a requirement to monitor the trial sites after harvest and destroy any remaining GM material.
- These strict containment conditions have been effective for all of the GM wheat field trials conducted to date.
- CSIRO has permission to conduct controlled nutritional trials in animals and humans with GM wheat modified to have improved nutritional properties.
- Damaging, destroying or interfering with GMO dealings is an offence under section 192A of the Gene Technology Act.

Further Background:

- This incident and associated media follows on from Greenpeace report "Spliced Bread: GE wheat coming to a store near you", October 2010, some media interest in GM wheat field trials in March, May and June and the release of a second GM wheat report 'Australia's wheat scandal: The biotech takeover of our daily bread' on 7/7/11.
- OGTR staff are investigating this incident and you will be provided with updated briefing when facts come to hand.
- The Greenpeace actions potentially compromise containment of the GM wheat field trial. However, initial indications suggest no GM material has been removed from the trial site.
- Prior to issuing any approval for field release, the Regulator must undertake a comprehensive assessment of the risks to health and safety of people and the environment using evidence from the scientific literature as well as information required from applicants. The Regulator must also seek advice of experts (including the Gene Technology Technical Advisory Committee), other government agencies, the Environment Minister, the states and territories and relevant local governments and consult with the public.
- Risk analysis by the Regulator applies best practice, is widely respected nationally and internationally and is based on key international standards.
- The Regulator will only issue a licence to allow a field trial to be conducted if he is satisfied that any potential risks can be managed to protect people and the environment.
- Since 2005, the Regulator has approved 11 licences for field trials (limited and controlled release) of GM wheat for research purposes only (10 approvals are current) for research on GM wheat with traits such as salt tolerance, drought tolerance, altered starch content or improved nitrogen use efficiency.
- Each trial is limited in size and duration. Current licences for GM wheat, held by the CSIRO, the University of Adelaide and the Victorian Department of Primary Industries, range in size from 0.1 to 2 hectares per year for up to 5 years.
- Two licences issued to CSIRO in 2009 to grow GM wheat in the ACT authorise experimental animal nutritional studies and one also authorises human nutritional studies. These studies are subject to animal and human ethics approvals and will use products made from GM wheat with altered grain starch for improving nutritional properties such as glycemic index.
- Monsanto does not hold, nor has it applied for, a licence to conduct field trials of GM wheat.
- GM field trials are subject to licence conditions requiring strict containment to limit the potential spread and persistence of the GMO in the environment and ensure the appropriate transport, storage and disposal of all GM material.
- The OGTR inspects trials to monitor for compliance with licence conditions.
- Details of approved limited and controlled releases of GMOs, including the comprehensive Risk Assessments and Risk Management Plans, the locations of field trials and applications under consideration are available on the OGTR website at www.ogtr.gov.au
- GM wheat field trials have also been approved in other countries including USA, Canada and Germany