

GENETICALLY MODIFIED CROPS IN AUSTRALIA

Current Issue

- *What measures will the government implement to ensure genetically modified crops and foods are safe?*

Talking Points

- The regulation of genetically modified organisms and genetically modified food in Australia is achieved through an integrated legislative framework.
- The framework 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.
- Economic and marketing considerations such as coexistence and segregation in agricultural supply chains are addressed through state specific requirements and industry protocols.
- 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.

- 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.

Additional Key Facts

- 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.
- 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.
- In 2010, nearly 133,330 hectares of genetically modified canola was planted in Australia. 2010 was the third year genetically modified canola could be grown commercially in New South Wales (24,040 hectares) and Victoria (36,500 hectares). It was 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 will not approve a genetically modified food for sale or use if there is evidence it would pose public health and safety concerns. More than 40 genetically modified foods have been approved to date.
- 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.

- 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.
- 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.
- 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.
- Genetically modified crops can benefit the environment by changing the way farmers manage their crops.
- ABAREs 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.
- The debate regarding liability associated with genetically modified crops in Australia is not new. During development of the Gene Technology Bill 2000 (Commonwealth), submissions were received from interested parties seeking the imposition of strict liability for damage caused by genetically modified organisms; and also seeking that compensation be established to protect victims of genetic contamination.
- A Statutory Review of the *Gene Technology Act 2000* was conducted in 2005. The review concluded that the object of the Act (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 Genetically Modified Organisms) was being achieved.

In assessing whether the object of the Act was being achieved, the review considered issues such as the introduction of strict liability for contamination and concluded that specific provisions should not be introduced on strict liability, compensation funds, mandatory insurance and third party appeals.

- State reviews of genetically modified crop moratorium legislation concluded that liability concerns can be adequately dealt with through common law and consumer protection legislation and therefore there is no need for additional liability measures to be put in place.

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