

GM-free: the way of the future

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Foods from genetically manipulated (GM) crops and animals are rejected by most farmers, shoppers and food processors around the world. If these mutant foods were fully labelled, as they should be, consumer rejection would ensure that GM food crops were not grown.

The environmental, social, ethical and economic impacts of radical new GM technology outweigh any promised benefits. Federal agriculture minister Tony Burke claims GM crops may contribute to easing the impacts of global climate change and the drought. But the salt-tolerant GM crops that he says will be our saviour are at least a decade or two away, if they ever eventuate. These promised band-aids should not affect our decisions now.

Despite public opposition, in 2002 Australia's Office of Gene Technology Regulator issued licences for the unrestricted commercial release of herbicide-tolerant GM canola. With genes from soil bacteria inserted, these plants survive being sprayed with broad spectrum herbicides — either Roundup (Monsanto's plant killer) or Basta (Bayer's plant killer) — that would normally kill all plants. Farmers who use the patented GM seed can drench their fields with higher doses of weedicides, throughout the growing season.

Governments of all canola-growing states (Queensland and NT do not grow canola) used the powers given to them by Section 21 of the Commonwealth Gene Technology Act 2000 to ban GM canola for marketing reasons. They had heard from the food industry that valuable export and local markets would be lost if GM crops were grown. For instance, 15% of the annual \$5 billion wheat export market and \$500 million in yearly barley exports to Saudi Arabia would have been cancelled. Little has changed.

By banning GM food crops, we also reaped the benefits of preferential access to valuable markets which pay up to \$120/tonne extra for our food-grade GM-free canola. As Western Australia's agriculture minister Kim Chance said: "WA's GM-free canola is highly sought after in the world's most discriminating markets of Europe, Japan and, increasingly, China."

To their great credit, South Australia, Western Australia, Tasmania and the ACT are all committed to remaining GM-free for the foreseeable future. They listened to their communities and the whole food industry, finding that a majority favoured GM-free and its benefits.

In contrast, immediately after the federal election Victorian Premier John Brumby and NSW Premier Morris Iemma announced they would allow their state GM bans to expire on February 29 and March 3, 2008, respectively. GM canola seed would be sold for unrestricted planting in Victoria, while NSW would retain some control until 2011 with a state-based approval system. These governments listened only to the GM technology owners — Bayer (the world's biggest agrochemical company) and Monsanto (the biggest commercial seed company) — and their agribusiness allies. These interests argued that farmers must have the "choice" to grow GM canola.

But this choice — by the 27% of farmers who say they want to grow GM — would take everyone else's choice away and increasingly deliver control of our food supply to the GM giants. Commercial

GM canola releases will be permanent and irreversible. We'll be overrun by a plant version of the cane-toad that will exchange pollen with the common weeds wild radish, turnip and charlock, making super weeds that can never be recalled.

In allowing the GM bans to expire, Brumby and Iemma have not listened to public or parliamentary opinion. For instance, Coles and Foodland Supermarkets say over 90% of their customers want GM-free foods and their own brands will stay GM-free.

All Australian supermarkets, including Safeway/Woolworths, Aldi and IGA, should now go completely GM-free as British supermarkets did years ago, so their customers have real choice. Many backbench members of state parliaments are also arguing for GM-free, as thousands of their constituents tell them GM-free is the way to stay.

Numerous other companies publicly support extending the GM bans, including Goodman Fielder (Australia's biggest user of canola oil), Tatiara Meats (largest lamb exporter), Twynam Agricultural (grows GM cotton in Australia and GM soy in Argentina), Blue Lake Milling (Bordertown) and the Australian Grain Harvesters' Association. More than 250 smaller businesses and organisations have also signed a Gene Ethics statement of support for extending GM crop bans until 2013 (visit).

GM canola is only grown in Canada and the US, and it was less than 20% of global canola production last year. Canada's exports of canola are sold at discount prices, mostly for animal feed and bio-fuels. In contrast, GM-free canola is grown in 18 countries, many of which are our valued customers in Asia and the European Union. Australia's GM-free canola oil fills the rapidly growing demand for food-grade product and our customers pay top dollar in a market where food, feed and fuels are now competing.

We'd be fools to side with our GM competitors against our GM-free customers, sacrificing our competitive edge and removing their GM-free choice. Japanese buyers recently wrote long-term contracts with Kangaroo Island (SA) growers for GM-free canola at good premiums to ensure GM-free supplies. Our GM-free grains, dairy foods and wines also enjoy a competitive advantage in local and global markets but GM canola would tarnish their reputation.

A Rural Industries Research and Development Corporation (RIRDC) study warns that if GM crops were allowed here, GM-free producers would bear the extra costs of GM testing, segregation and market loss, estimated at 6-17% of the product's farm-gate value. Staying GM-free means no added costs for anyone.

The RIRDC concludes: "the average Australian farm household income would decrease with GM adoption — even with rice and wheat included — if the EU moratorium remains". No commercial GM rice or wheat exist and the EU's aversion to GM remains strong.

The 2007 annual global review of commercial GM crops by the International Service for the Acquisition of Agri-biotech Applications (ISAAA) showed that GM crops stalled many years ago. In 1996, GM soy, corn, canola and cotton were launched, with two new traits — tolerance to lethal weed killers or built-in Bt insect toxins. In 2008, just the same four crops and two traits are commercially available. Seven countries grew 97.5% of GM crops in 2007, the same as 2006. Five of those countries are in North or South America, where most GM crops are used for animal feed or biofuel production.

A few other countries dabble in GM crops but drop them when environmental, animal and human health impacts appear. Australia's cotton crop shrank from 220,000 hectares in 2005, to 134,000 in 2006, to about 60,000 hectares last year. GM is responsible for cotton's collapse as this follows the

lifting of the 30% cap on GM cotton in 2005, when GM's share shot to over 90%. The GM varieties seem poorly adapted to our drought conditions and a soil pathogen, fusarium wilt, has spread like wildfire through cotton since GM was introduced.

ISAAA inflates growth in the GM industry by double counting the hectares of GM crops where a plant contains two traits. The area of GM canola worldwide has not increased since 1999 and many North American farmers would give it up if there was an alternative. Terry Boehm of Canada's National Farmers Union recently told large Australian audiences that conventional GM-free seed was no longer available except from those individuals with the foresight to save it a decade ago when GM arrived.

It's not too late for all our governments to extend their GM bans. It's now up to local government, shoppers, farmers and the food industry to resist the GM invasion. A coalition of committed groups will continue to campaign for a GM-free future. Everyone has a role to play and your active support is welcome.

P.S.

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