



## Biotech Bulletin 7

# The Australian State of Play

Welcome to this edition of Agrifood Awareness Australia Limited's (AFAA) Biotech Bulletin. This edition, "The Australian State of Play", covers and questions state government positions on gene technology following recent announcements.

### INTRODUCTION

Is GM canola the subject of Australia's tall poppy syndrome? Despite a stringent, world-best, gene technology regulatory system, GM food labelling laws to allow consumer choice, and industry coexistence protocols, genetically modified (GM) canola has been prevented from commercial planting in all canola-growing states of Australia.

Australia has taken a world leadership role in responsible and stringent regulation and industry management protocols and still no crop can be grown – GM canola, as the test case for future GM crops, has been cut down.

Agrifood Awareness Australia Limited was established to support the generation of information to allow for informed decision making. Sadly, the current moratoria prevent anyone from meeting this basic need. Forget GM free zones, welcome to Australia's new data free zone!

Without larger scale trials no data will be generated. Farmers will not have the opportunity to see the products and make informed business decisions. Industry will be unable to demonstrate coexistence. City based consumers will continue to have the opportunity to make informed purchasing decisions in supermarkets but our farmers will be denied a crop production choice.

Genetically modified cotton is another very tall poppy we seem happy to disregard. Australian state governments have justified moratoria on the basis of protecting a "clean green" image. Surely our GM cotton – delivering a pesticide reduction of 50 per cent per annum in the areas it is grown – enhances, rather than detracts from such an image. Is this not something we should embrace and promote? Do the GM canola varieties currently under scrutiny not provide a "cleaner greener" alternative to some of the existing canola varieties under production?

Every Australian state and territory government (apart from the Northern Territory and Queensland) has implemented, or is in the process of implementing, its own GM legislation. Each state is unique – on timing, product and process. (See below). State governments are encouraging biotechnology investment, but fail to announce that research outcomes cannot be deployed and marketed. There is no clear path to commercialisation for organisations involved in gene technology research, and it must be kept in mind that the majority of this research in Australia is undertaken by public research agencies such as CSIRO, not by private, international corporations.

Two weeks ago in Perth, Australia's grain industry launched its "Single Vision". The new strategy will bring together Australia's leading grain bodies – ABB, AusBulk, AWB Ltd, CBH, Graincorp, Grains Council of Australia, and the Grains Research and Development Corporation – to address issues of common interest. One of the top four topics identified is gene technology. As the grains industry strives to move forward on gene technology, let's hope other agricultural industries (most of which invest in gene technology research) and governments can come together and unite in a

single vision. Next month I am speaking at a conference in Saskatoon entitled "Coexistence: the challenges and opportunities". I hope to be able to report that coexistence, aside from the challenges and opportunities, is an Australian reality.

Paula Fitzgerald  
Executive Director

## **AUSTRALIA – STATE BY STATE**

### **Australian Capital Territory**

#### **State of Play – Legislated moratorium on GM food crops until 2006 (tabled).**

Background - In June 2003 the Minister for Health announced a three-year moratorium on the commercial release of genetically modified (GM) food crops in the ACT to 2006. The moratorium will be reviewed annually. The Minister indicated that the Territory will continue to support gene technology scientific research, such as research undertaken at CSIRO overseen by the Gene Technology Regulator.

Under the Bill, the Minister has the power to impose an order prohibiting the cultivation in the ACT of a specified GM food plant or class of GM food plants. The Minister could also specifically exempt from prohibition any field trial or contained research of GM crops that have been approved by the Gene Technology Regulator. For a copy of the *Gene Technology (GM Crop Moratorium) Bill 2004* see [http://www.legislation.act.gov.au/b/db\\_10630/default.asp](http://www.legislation.act.gov.au/b/db_10630/default.asp)

Also tabled in the ACT is a Bill introduced by the Greens - *The GMO (Environment Protection) Bill*. This Bill calls for a blanket ban of all environmental releases of GMOs, including field trials, until more is known on their environmental impact. For a copy of the Greens Bill tabled in November 2003 see [http://www.legislation.act.gov.au/b/db\\_8618/default.asp](http://www.legislation.act.gov.au/b/db_8618/default.asp)

### **New South Wales**

#### **State of Play – Legislated moratorium on GM food crops until 2006.**

Background - In June 2003, legislation was passed banning the commercial release of GM food crops for three years to 2006. The legislation, *Gene Technology (GM Crop Moratorium) Bill* provides for the Agriculture Minister to issue exemption orders. A NSW Agricultural Advisory Council on Gene Technology was also established to provide advice to the Minister.

A joint submission was provided to the Agriculture Minister by Bayer Crop Science, Monsanto and the Australian Oilseeds Federation seeking permission to conduct coexistence trials in NSW in 2004. On 1 April, the Minister announced that the coexistence trials had not been approved, but approval had been granted to allow three small scale GM canola research trials, covering no more than 420 hectares in total. The Minister has suggested that if the small scale trials show benefits, he would consider coexistence trials at a later date. For further information see <http://www.parliament.nsw.gov.au/prod/web/phweb.nsf/frames/bills>

### **South Australia**

#### **State of Play – Legislated moratorium on GM crops until 2006.**

Background – On 31 March, the South Australian *GM Crops Management Bill* passed through both the Upper and Lower Houses of State Parliament imposing a ban on GM crops for three years. The Bill does provide for exemptions to allow field trials to continue under specific conditions. It also establishes two dedicated GM free zones – Eyre Peninsula and Kangaroo Island. For a copy of the Minister for Agriculture's media release see <http://www.ministers.sa.gov.au/Minister/MediaFrame.asp?article=2751&MinisterID=15>

### **Tasmania**

#### **State of Play – Legislated moratorium on GM crops and animals until 2008.**

Background - The Tasmanian Government extended its one year moratorium on the commercial release of GM crops and animals for a further five years to June 2008 under the *Tasmanian Plant*

*Quarantine Act 1997*. The Primary Industries, Water and Environment Minister has the ability to re-evaluate aspects of the policy prior to June 2008. Provisions for research trials using GM non-food crops have been made, as GM poppy field trials continue in Tasmania, despite the moratorium.

According to recent media reports, Tasmania plans to replace this legislation made under the Plant Quarantine Act with a specific gene technology bill - the *Genetically Modified Organisms Control Bill 2004* – following in the steps of other state governments. For further information see [http://www.parliament.tas.gov.au/bills/pdf/9\\_of\\_2004.pdf](http://www.parliament.tas.gov.au/bills/pdf/9_of_2004.pdf)

## **Victoria**

### **State of Play - Legislated moratorium on GM crops until 2008 (tabled).**

Background - In May 2003, the Victorian Government announced a one-year moratorium on the commercial production of GM canola. On 25 March 2004, 10 months following the first announcement, the Premier, announced the moratorium would continue for a further four years until 2008.

The Government introduced the *Control of Genetically Modified Crops 2004* Bill at the end of March, to give the state legislative control over the planting of GM crops in Victoria generally, specifically prohibiting the commercial planting of GM canola until 2008. For further information on the Bill see <http://dms003.dpc.vic.gov.au/pdocs/bills/B01891/index.html>

The Victorian State Government also released an independent report by Melbourne University Professor Peter Lloyd. The report entitled “Review of market impacts of genetically modified canola and industry preparedness” was part of the review process the Government set in place to determine whether GM canola should be released in Victoria for commercial production.

For a copy of the report see

<http://www.vic.gov.au/VictoriaOnline?action=content&id=328&pageName=Latest&pageTitle=Latest>

## **Western Australia**

### **State of Play - Legislated moratorium on GM crops until 2008.**

In May 2003, the *Genetically Modified Crops Free Areas Bill 2003* was introduced into Parliament. The Bill provided for the State Government to declare areas of the state, as areas where GM crops could not be grown. On 22 March 2004, the Premier of Western Australia declared the entire State of Western Australia a GM free area for five years. He indicated that contained laboratory research and small scale field trials will be allowed to continue. He indicated that the legislation allows for possible exemptions to be granted in the future. For further information see <http://www.slp.wa.gov.au/statutes/swans.nsf/Current%20Legislation%20Version2?OpenView&Star%20t=1&Count=600&Expand=8&RestrictToCategory=G#8>

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We look forward to your feedback on this newsletter.

For further information, please contact the AFAA office on (02) 6273 9535 or via email – [info@afaa.com.au](mailto:info@afaa.com.au)

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