



Biotech Bulletin 18

Coexistence Progress: Here and Abroad

Welcome to Agrifood Awareness Australia Limited's (AFAA) latest Biotech Bulletin. This edition, entitled "Coexistence progress here and abroad", outlines recent developments in Australia, a publication launched today by the Supply Chain Initiative on Modified Agricultural Crops (SCIMAC) in the United Kingdom and progress surrounding coexistence initiatives within the 25 European Union (EU) Member States.

INTRODUCTION

Coexistence remains a topic of discussion as a result of the continued global increase and adoption of genetically modified (GM) crops. More than eight million farmers in 21 countries grew GM crops across 90 million hectares in 2005.

Last October, national consensus was achieved in Australia regarding practical thresholds to deal with the issue of traces of GM canola in conventional canola consignments and variety trials. The Primary Industries Ministerial Council (PIMC), which is comprised of Ministers from the Australian Government and each state and territory, agreed upon adventitious presence (AP) thresholds for the presence of GM canola in conventional grain and seed.

Adventitious presence can be defined as the unintentional mixing of trace amounts of seed of one plant variety with another variety. Low levels of varietal impurities are an inherent problem in seed and grain production, and this has clearly been recognised by industry groups and Australian and international regulatory authorities through the establishment of practical AP thresholds. Seed standards and tolerances, and seed production processes that minimise low levels of impurities, have been implemented to keep AP levels to a realistic and acceptable level in many different commodities, including grains. By implementing sound on-farm management practices, growers can, and have, kept AP levels within the required threshold.

The PIMC meeting agreed on two thresholds:

- An AP threshold of 0.9 per cent GM canola in canola grain. This is the threshold supported by the Australian Oilseeds Federation (AOF).
- A second threshold for AP of GM canola in seed was set at 0.5 per cent for 2006 and 2007, to be reduced to 0.1 per cent thereafter. The Australian Seed Federation (ASF) established an AP threshold of 0.5 per cent GM seed in non-GM planting seed in 2003 following two years of research and consultation with the canola seed industry.

Following this development, Agrifood Awareness Australia (AFAA) Limited's *Towards Coexistence: Management practices for agricultural production systems* publication was distributed in February to more than 35,000 grain growers and agribusiness representatives across Australia.

TOWARDS COEXISTENCE – A RECAP

Coexistence is not a new concept in farming, although it has been revitalised because of the rapid global adoption of GM crops alongside organic, specialty and conventional crop production systems. *Towards Coexistence: Management practices for agricultural production systems*, the publication produced by AFAA reinforced this point. Farmers already implement coexistence measures designed to deliver products that meet market requirements. Talking to their neighbours, separating food and feed grain grown on-farm and producing certified seedstock are all examples of these practices.

The increase in attention achieved by coexistence is due to the growing consumer and producer awareness of providing choice, maintaining integrity, and providing traceability in the food supply irrespective of the production system utilised – be that organic, specialty, GM or conventional.

Coexistence of different production systems and the need for traceability requires an increasing commitment to supply chain management to ensure:

- final product integrity
- prevention of unintended presence of 'GM material' to below market thresholds
- full traceability of products through the supply chain
- sampling and testing regimes for product verification
- minimal costs for all supply chain participants.

The booklet encourages all growers to be aware of agricultural practices, regulations, thresholds, testing procedures, neighbours and their crops, farm equipment, transport and storage facilities, records, buyers, risks and insurance policies in relation to the type of crop they are growing.

For more information: www.afa.com.au

The momentum has now moved to the UK and Europe, with SCIMAC today launching *GM crop coexistence – 10 key principles*, and the EU Member States meeting to discuss the progress of implementing national coexistence measures this week.

SCIMAC represents organisations along the UK farm supply chain and it was established in 1998 to support the carefully managed introduction of GM crops in the UK. The group supports case-by-case, science-based regulation of GM crop technology and is committed to delivering genuine choice and coexistence between GM and non-GM approaches to crop production.

GM CROP COEXISTENCE - 10 KEY PRINCIPLES

The launch of the SCIMAC coexistence principles coincides with a European Union GM crop coexistence conference being held in Vienna this week. According to SCIMAC Chairman Bob Fiddaman, "Although the UK has yet to consult on the coexistence issue, we have watched with a mixture of disbelief and dismay as other Member States have blatantly sought to use coexistence arrangements as a political barrier to the development of GM crop technology."

"SCIMAC represents those sectors of the agricultural supply chain...who will deal with the issue of coexistence in practice. We have issued our ten guiding principles to cut through the campaigning rhetoric and propaganda, and set the issue of coexistence in perspective," he said.

The SCIMAC 10 point plan is summarised below:

- 1. Co-existence is an economic issue – it is not about safety**
All GM crops must undergo rigorous safety assessments prior to their approval for commercial release. Coexistence is not therefore concerned with safety, but with the implications for farmers of meeting market requirements in the context of a 0.9 per cent GM food labelling threshold.
- 2. The need for coexistence measures will be determined by market demand**
GM crops offer another choice for farmers. Farmers will only choose to grow them if they make economic sense.
- 3. A zero threshold is not achievable, but practical tolerance thresholds work**
In every crop sector, practical tolerance levels are applied to define a crop's end-use quality and value according to such things as varietal purity or freedom from unwanted material.
- 4. Coexistence is not a new concept in farming**
The agricultural supply chain is currently able to provide a range of market channels with different labelling and/or quality requirements. For example industrial and food grade oilseed rape, and sweetcorn and forage maize. In each case, well-established practices are in place to deliver coexistence, for

example, neighbour-to-neighbour communication, separation distances between crops, and segregation during harvest, storage and transport.

5. Coexistence is not a one-way street

As farming takes place in the open air, coexistence depends on well-established measures, including mutual cooperation between farmers, to ensure the integrity of crops destined for different markets.

6. GM growers cannot reasonably be expected to bear responsibility for the self-imposed marketing standards of others

Growers of GM crops must bear the initial responsibility for delivering coexistence measures to meet the legislated 0.9 per cent GM labelling threshold, however where voluntary marketing standards specify a lower threshold, GM growers cannot be held accountable for these lower self-imposed criteria.

7. GM crops introduce no new liability issues

Once GM crops are approved as safe for commercial release and marketing, there are no grounds to suggest they should be treated differently than non-GM products in terms of liability.

8. Experience of growing GM crops in other parts of the world confirms that coexistence is achievable

Where GM crops are grown commercially around the world, there is no evidence over the past decade of farmers routinely suing each other or claiming compensation.

9. No one can predict whether new price differentials will emerge or be sustained between GM and non-GM value chains

SCIMAC would challenge the assumption that GM crops will always and inevitably trade at a discount. In Spain, for example, there is no price differential between GM and non-GM maize, other than for regular quality parameters. Where no price differential exists, there may be no potential for economic loss or liability.

10. Gene flow data offers a high degree of confidence that breach of a labelling threshold would be extremely rare

Based on the wealth of practical experience and scientific data now available, SCIMAC takes the view that breach of the 0.9 per cent GM labelling threshold would be extremely rare where all farmers have complied with the respective coexistence measures. If GM (or non-GM) growers are at fault through misuse of product or non-compliance, however, they should bear any responsibility and cost.

“Effective coexistence means farmers can make a genuine choice between growing, conventional, organic and GM crops. It should not be treated as a pro- or anti- GM issue – the aim of coexistence is to permit choice and freedom to operate whatever the production method involved,” concluded Mr Fiddaman.

For more information - www.scimac.org.uk/

COEXISTENCE IN THE EU – STATUS REPORT

A European Commission document titled *Report on the implementation of national measures on the coexistence of genetically modified crops with conventional and organic farming* was released last month and provides solid background on the progress towards coexistence in EU Member States. Six European countries grew commercial GM crops in 2005 – Spain, Germany, Romania, France, the Czech Republic and Portugal.

The Commission “firmly believes that consumers and producers should have a real choice with respect to the type of agricultural products and the type of production they prefer. National coexistence legislation should allow market forces to operate freely in compliance with Community legislation.”

Legislation in the European Union calls on Member States to take appropriate national measures on coexistence in order to avoid the unintended presence of GMOs in other products, but Member States are not obliged to implement coexistence measures. Further, Member States may generally not prohibit, restrict or impede the placing on the market of authorised GMOs.

A list of general principles and technical measures have been developed by the European Commission to guide the Member States in developing their own national strategies and best practices. Appropriate measures for coexistence must consider factors which vary from one region to another, for example, climate, soil conditions, the size and dispersion of fields, cropping patterns and crop rotations.

By the end of 2005, specific coexistence legislation had been adopted in Denmark, Germany, Portugal and several jurisdictions in Austria. Most of the remaining Member States have such legislation drafted, whilst others have seen some legislation drafted at the regional level only. Spain continues to be the only EU Member State with a significant commercial GM crop, 58,000 hectares of insect-resistant corn were grown in 2004. The successful implementation of supply chain stewardship practices mean that Spain has not had to introduce specific coexistence legislation to-date.

In relation to the way ahead, the Commission proposes to:

- strengthen its efforts to make existing information available to all Member States and to support research activities that fill significant gaps in knowledge;
- review and analyse the latest scientific and economic information available, on segregation measures in crop and seed production and their costs taking into consideration market demand for segregation and the relative share of food and feed use in different regions;
- work jointly with the Member States and stakeholders on the development of best practices for technical segregation measures, leading to crop specific recommendations. Consideration will be given to the impact of local factors such as average field sizes and share of different crops;
- obtain more information about the existing national civil liability systems in view of the national rules applying to the admixture of GM crops to non-GM crops in order to assess the impact and effects of diverging rules on liability and compensation schemes with respect to coexistence; and,
- report to the European Parliament in 2008 on the progress made in relation to the above-mentioned activities, including an update on the development and implementation of national coexistence measures.

For more information: http://ec.europa.eu/comm/agriculture/coexistence/com104_en.pdf

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

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