



OPINION PIECE

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Parliamentary point scoring or the good oil on ag?

Parliament resumes in Western Australia this week and there's a good story to be told – despite an average season, the grains industry has delivered Market Choice with GM canola.

Over 300 growers planted 73,000 hectares of GM canola in WA last season - twice what was anticipated. Where there was some rain, growers reported good crop performance and excellent weed control. Their crop has been harvested, transported and delivered. No fuss, just matter-of-fact, as agriculture does these things.

Meanwhile, down round Kojonup, someone has chosen to create a storm in a teacup.

Agriculture operates in nature - where there's no such thing as zero tolerance and absolute certainty. Birds fly, plants grow, winds blow, rains fall and fires burn where they will – this is nature. A zero tolerance for something is simply not achievable in a biological system.

At the busy coffee shop I order a decaf latte, but I know that there's a high chance it contains a granule or two of caffeine from the previous order. But this doesn't change the status of my coffee. These are allowances we accept everyday because we appreciate how things work in the real world. Agriculture operates in that space. Just because there might be some GM-bred plants sitting on an organic paddock doesn't alter the status of that paddock. It doesn't mean that paddock cannot continue producing organic wheat.

The Australian organic sector has tolerances for the unintentional presence of a number of non-organic products, including crop inputs. Internationally, organic sectors also have allowances for unintended presence of GM plants and crops but the Australian organic sector has failed to update its standards and adopt international best practice, since GM canola came on line. They claim that Australian consumers will only accept 'zero' – but zero isn't physically possible and organic products from all around the world, sold in Australia, have allowances. Australian consumers appear to happily purchase these products.

The simple facts aren't front page news but they do make a good story:

- GM canola varieties have been grown, traded and consumed around the world for 15 years.
- In Canada, Australia's major canola competitor, over 85% of varieties grown are GM varieties.
- In Canada, alongside the significant uptake of GM canola, organic canola oil is produced and sold. The Canadian organic sector has allowances for unintended products.
- GM canola varieties give farmers better weed management options – less weeds means more and higher yielding plants, which in turn means increased food production.
- In 2010, 300 farmers grew GM canola in WA – more than double that anticipated. Despite very average weather conditions, those farmers who received sufficient rain reported good crop performance and weed management.
- WA's GM canola was grown, transported and handled according to standards and protocols – to meet market requirements.
- Growers have expressed keenness to plant and try GM canola in 2011 – with strong seed orders for this year.

After recent weather events in Western Australia, there has been a suggestion that those growers who have not yet grown GM canola were "terrified". But, with GM canola seed orders in WA up by more than 50% this year, it appears the only thing growers are terrified of is missing out!

Here's to the kicking-off of the WA parliamentary season and the good oil on WA agriculture!

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