



Romance or science for Australian agriculture?

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The Western Australian Parliament recently voted 26-24 to allow WA growers to plant GM canola. This comes fourteen years after the rest of the world.

The parliamentary debate took three hours and was at times tedious, ploughing over very old, tired ground, in clear disregard of all the science. Yes, it is in these halls, in many jurisdictions, that major decisions about plant science and food security are made.

This landmark event is unlikely to have occurred had it not been for the leadership of the WA Agriculture Minister, Terry Redman, who invested considerable time seeking science, evidence and fact in order to make an informed decision.

Cane toads, our 'clean green image', consumer opinion, agricultural exports, choice, weeds, agronomics, corporate agriculture, grain handling and logistics, drought, and safety,... all these topics were raised. None of these is unique to GM crops and yet they were portrayed to be exclusively linked.

This serves as a wake-up call and an incentive to ask serious questions. While some of the parliamentary debate came down to good, old fashioned politics it is time to consider where mainstream agriculture is heading in Australia.

The WA decision should have been a 'no brainer' but instead we witnessed a debate centred on perceived risks with no scientific basis. And, the decision came down to just two votes.

This would not have occurred if decision makers and their constituents were aware that modern Australian agricultural science underpins our existence with the production of safe, affordable food via R&D investment, use of new technology, supply chain management, stewardship ... the list goes on.

Further, our community would appreciate that Australian farmers make business decisions which are economically and environmentally sustainable.

In contrast to this reality, a number of decision makers - and some in the media over the past 18 months - have suggested that farmers are blindly being wooed by technology and are engaging in risky business and dangerous food production that will cause havoc. Not to mention the 'gushing' over the (creeping) romance that organic farming will feed the world!

A member of the WA Parliament recently highlighted some research on GM food and consumers in an effort to demonstrate that Australians do not want GM canola. Any poll can ask questions that generate desired answers. Yet, it appears no consumer poll on rapeseed or canola, or herbicide tolerant canola, has been conducted. Why then, simply because two letters ("GM") have been added in front of canola, is there suddenly an expectation to achieve complete consumer acceptance?

The WA Agriculture Minister has stated that there is a need to 'bring the community along' on the topic of GM. Yes, there surely is but it's way-beyond just gene technology. Climate change, animal exports, water management, drought, R&D investments in agriculture and science, infrastructure, and building a skills-based industry - these topics are all currently in the spotlight. The challenge for agriculture is leading these discussions, based on science.

To provide an example: CSIRO recently launched a new initiative around sustainable agriculture. But what is "sustainability"? Do we have a definition? Is it an agreed definition? Have we shared the definition with industry partners, the community and decision makers? Is this not an opportunity to take ownership, drive the debate, set bold targets and deliver sensible outcomes for agriculture and the public it provides for ... or, do we instead sit back and wait for it to be snapped up and defined by non-agricultural experts or vested interests, thrown into the political arena, and then we finally get engaged and chase our tails in an attempt to rescue some sort of meaningful, "sustainable" outcome?

The successful bringing to market of GM canola (with the exception of South Australia) has been a long, steady, detailed team effort. Around 45 organisations have been engaged. This is an achievement – many agriculture organisations have worked together to discuss, debate, coordinate, communicate, design technical solutions, manage issues, and form and disseminate shared positions on GM canola. Importantly, this has been achieved with transparency and respect. When Australian agriculture is focussed great outcomes can be delivered.

The stewarding of GM canola has just begun. It will be followed by wheat, sugarcane, pasture and more. Australian agriculture has established a good working model that can be utilised, enhanced and tailored for future GM crops. If this is done well Aussie farmers will have the opportunity, as they should, to plant these improved varieties without a 14 year delay!

Recently a colleague described the work of her organisation, she said: "We do not have placards or costumes. Yes, we are an NGO but we go by the consensus of world-best science". We really need to reconnect our community with modern day food production and get science back in decision making.

Agrifood Awareness Australia Limited (AFAA) is an industry initiative, established to increase public awareness of, and encourage informed debate and decision-making about gene technology. AFAA is committed to providing quality, factual, science-based information on the use of gene technology in agriculture to allow for informed decisions. AFAA works broadly across the agriculture sector. The organisation has three founding members – [CropLife Australia](#), [Grains Research and Development Corporation](#) and the [National Farmers' Federation](#) – and our activities are also supported by the sugar industry, the [Grain Growers Association](#) and through a project partnership with the red meat industry.

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