



LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Sydney Morning Herald
11 February 2011

Elizabeth Farrelly (Opinion 10 February) targets Western Australia's agriculture minister for allowing farmers to plant new canola varieties, which the rest of the world has successfully grown, traded and consumed for 15 years. One wonders if Ms Farrelly would be happy to wind back the clock and continue using 1996 technology for the rest of her life.

In nature, there is no such thing as zero – birds fly, winds blow, rains fall, fires burn. Zero doesn't exist in nature and agriculture and yet the Australian organic sector appears to be promising its customers something its members cannot physically deliver. 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. 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. The presence of a GM plant or leaf sitting on an organic paddock doesn't alter the status of that farm.

Not that far outside Sydney, some 90 percent of Australia's cotton crop – that delivers fibre for clothing, oil for cooking food and meal for feeding livestock – is grown to GM varieties. Growers embraced these varieties 15 years ago and they have delivered a significant (85 per cent per season) reduction in pesticides, a huge environmental outcome. Grain growers in New South Wales have also embraced GM canola varieties because they offer significant weed control benefits. Less weeds competing with crops, means more and higher yielding plants, and in turn, more food production.

Farmers, like other professionals - journalists, shop owners and restaurateurs - are business people. They put seeds in the ground, spend money on inputs, use computer generated technology to monitor soils, plan for weather events and harvest and deliver the final crop. If the seed doesn't grow or the input doesn't work, they don't bother repeating it – because they have a choice of crops and technologies. To imply they are lulled by slick company marketing campaigns, and false promises and grow unsafe food is an insult to one of Australia's most innovative sectors.

Of course non-agriculture experts can also be lulled into believing slick campaigns by multinational companies. Ms Farrelly has cleverly wrapped 50 Greenpeace yarns into a very smooth story. Will readers be tricked or will commonsense, scientific fact and an understanding of farmers and food production win the day?

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