



Media Release

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Gene technology survey – gap between farm and fork

The latest gene technology market research findings highlight an acceptance of gene technology in agriculture, but raise some questions about its use in end food products and medical applications.

Responding to the market research released this week by the Commonwealth Government agency, Biotechnology Australia, Executive Manager of Agrifood Awareness Australia, Paula Fitzgerald said, "The results clearly support a need for ongoing, balanced, and credible gene technology information, which also addresses how food is produced."

The survey of 1200 people indicated that since 1999, there has been a significant increase in the number of respondents describing plants with pest resistance as a useful application of gene technology for society – increasing from 31 to 37 per cent.

"This result may be attributed to the success of genetically modified (GM) pest resistant cotton in Australia, which has reduced pesticide use by an average of 50 per cent per annum – an encouraging result for the cotton industry and surrounding regional communities," she said.

Most focus group respondents also felt that plants were already being modified with other plant genetic material and that this is an accepted and established agricultural practice.

In contrast, the survey noted a significant increase in the number of people who believed that using gene technology in food and drink production is a risky application for society – from 67 per cent in 1999, to 73 per cent in 2001.

"This is contrary to the increased acceptance of GM plants with pest resistance," she said. "Clearly consumers are not linking crops with the food on their dinner tables, and this may be a key issue for farmers wanting to access this technology in the future."

“Also, while the results showed concerns about GM food, almost half of the respondents (49 per cent) said that they would still eat foods that have been genetically modified, highlighting that concerns do not always correlate with consumer behaviour,” she said.

Another survey finding revealed respondents generally believed that unless a food product was marked as organic, it was genetically modified – included in this category were foods produced using traditional techniques with pesticides or fertilisers.

Further to this, the study showed that the majority of Australians are unsure (47 per cent neither agreed or disagreed) or did not know (19 per cent) whether “there are no fresh fruit and vegetables produced in Australia using gene technology”.

“There are currently no GM fresh fruits and vegetables available in Australia,” she said. “A GM product takes eight to thirteen years to develop from a scientific idea to a commercial reality, and while there are some projects looking at the potential of gene technology in fruit, these are still in the early development stages.”

“Despite anti-gene technology activists trying to misrepresent the survey findings and calling for research to be placed on hold, it is clear the results reinforce the need for ongoing, open gene technology research to tackle consumer concerns,” she said. “In addition to this a concerted effort is needed to close the gap between food producers and food consumers, which Agrifood Awareness Australia will continue to address.”

“The survey is timely, with the release this week of the New Zealand Royal Commission on Genetic Modification, which recognised the importance of ongoing gene technology research and contributed enormously to balanced gene technology communication and debate,” said Ms Fitzgerald.

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For further information contact:

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The gene technology market research results can be found at:

http://www.biotechnology.gov.au/Whats_New/index.asp

The New Zealand Royal Commission on Genetic Modification Report can be found at:

<http://www.gmcommission.govt.nz/RCGM/index.html>