



Media Release

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GM crops - field trials essential for informed judgement

Field trials of genetically modified (GM) crops are vital to assess the potential of gene technology and ensure Australia makes a considered decision about the technology's future according to Agrifood Awareness Australia.

Speaking at the NSW Farmers' Association Annual Horticulture Conference, Executive Manager of Agrifood Awareness Australia, Ms Paula Fitzgerald, said that while discussion and debate about gene technology were critical, it was also important for people to understand the role that field trials play in the process.

"It takes eight to thirteen years for a GM product to progress from an idea to a commercial reality," Ms Fitzgerald said. "During this time, the GM product undergoes a number of environmental and health risk assessments, and field trials play an important role in this.

"After several years in the laboratory and glasshouse, the first field trial is often only the size of an average suburban backyard or vegetable patch," she said. "If the first field trial is successful, then the product undergoes further trials, closer to true paddock size.

"Field trials are necessary to ensure the crop poses no unmanageable risks and to assess the crop under Australian environmental conditions," she said. "The trials also allow the developer to select the best varieties to commercialise.

"All field trials in Australia must adhere to strict conditions and management guidelines," she said. "Australia's new gene technology laws scheduled to commence on 21 June will see field trials undergoing inspections by the regulatory body.

"Each GM crop is judged on a case-by-case basis and may have different field management guidelines," she said. "In the case of a crop such as GM canola, a buffer zone surrounds the field trial – a zone established to minimise pollen transfer from the GM crop.

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“Over the past months we have seen several Shire Councils and associated public meetings, including Cabonne Shire, voting against GM crops, indicating they would prefer to ‘wait and see’,” she said. “While a ‘wait and see’ philosophy may have some merits, it is critical that people understand that without field trials, when and if they choose to end the ‘wait and see’ period, there will be no GM varieties available for them to grow commercially.

“For the horticulture industry, field trials will be critical to see the commercialisation of GM products currently under development in Australia, including tomatoes with improved flavour, disease resistant grapevines, and a number of non-browning horticulture fruits and vegetables.

“It is great to see that Shire Councils are creating opportunities for the community to be involved in the gene technology debate,” Ms Fitzgerald said. “However, in doing this, councils must ensure they understand the importance of field trials, and the role for councils in the overall debate and regulatory framework,” she said.

Paula Fitzgerald will be speaking at the NSW Farmers’ Association Annual Horticulture Conference, “Opportunities for Horticulture” at 10.15am on Friday, 15 June. The Conference is being held at Turners Vineyard, Mitchell Highway, between Orange and Lucknow.

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