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GM crops – science should prevail over superstition and prejudice

Statement by Paula Matthewson, CEO CropLife Australia

Professional GM opponents made another attempt today in Western Australia to persuade decision makers to accept superstition and prejudice instead of science and objectivity when it comes to GM crops and food.

Despite Western Australian farmers calling for the same right to choose to grow GM canola as their competitors do in New South Wales and Victoria, a small but vocal minority continue to campaign against this right using misinformation, innuendo and hyperbole.

The facts are clear and compelling:

- 110 accredited canola farmers in NSW and Victoria have planted all the available seed this year in Australia's first GM canola crop. 1000 cotton farmers have been growing GM cotton in Australia for the past 12 years.
- The GM canola farmers have reported better weed control and more vigorous plants as well as significant reductions in the use of harsher pesticides.
- WA farmers want the right to choose to grow GM canola because there are significant export markets, including Japan, which want to buy Australian GM canola.
- Strict labelling laws already apply in Australia to GM foods, allowing consumers to make informed purchasing decisions.
- Recent credible government sponsored surveys of consumer attitudes in Europe, Canada and Australia show that consumers are not concerned about GM foods.
- Tests undertaken to determine the safety of GM foods are based on principles developed internationally which are also followed by Canada, Europe, Japan and the US.
- GM crops have been more extensively studied and assessed for safety than any other foods and have been found to be safe. A report commissioned by the European Union released earlier this month looked at all available toxicity studies, multi-generation animal feeding studies and health assessments of people who have consumed GM food. The EU experts concluded in their report that there has been no demonstration of any negative health effects from GM food and the evidence is comprehensive that existing GM foods are as safe as conventionally produced food. This same conclusion has been reached by the World Health Organization, the United Nations, the Australian Academy of Sciences and at least 7 other national science bodies.
- Australian farmers have for many decades managed crops to ensure that they do not inadvertently promote resistance to pesticides or become present in other crops. As an added precaution, farmers growing GM canola must complete an accreditation course. In 2008, around 450 growers and consultants successfully completed this course and around 110 accredited growers have planted GM canola.
- GM canola growers are required to adhere to good farm management practices which cover on-farm strategies and include: resistance management plans, paddock risk assessment, record keeping, inspections, audits and compliance, crop agronomy, coexistence/product integrity (including GM and non-GM productions, neighbour communication etc), canola volunteer management, weed management and seed hygiene.
- Although only one company's GM canola is currently being grown in Australia, there are several other companies, some in joint partnership with governments and universities, developing GM crops for Australia. Six companies also have 38 GM food products approved for sale and consumption by the Australian food regulator FSANZ.

It is disappointing that professional GM opponents use innuendo and hyperbole to try to create anxiety about the role of the business sector in developing crop biotechnologies.

These opponents, some of which are employed by a large and powerful multinational activist organisation, often imply that the involvement of business is somehow immoral.

It is a fact that businesses as well as governments invest in the development of crop biotechnologies. Companies do so because it makes good business sense. Governments do so because there are compelling public benefits.

Governments are involved in research projects around Australia including those to develop better fodder for dairy cows, virus resistant bananas and pineapples, and drought resistant wheat. GM crops also can help the world deal with climate change and food production pressures.

And let's not forget Australian farmers, who are canny business operators themselves. They want the right to choose to grow GM crops because they can see it gives their overseas competitors an advantage and it makes good business sense.

Let's move on from superstition and prejudice about GM crops. When you look objectively at the facts, they speak for themselves.

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CropLife Australia is the peak body representing the producers of crop protection and crop biotechnology products in Australia and is a member of CropLife International - a global network of associations in 91 countries working together towards sustainable agriculture.

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