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MEDIA RELEASE

GM wheat – step by step

International grains industry leaders are building-up their consideration of the market and trade requirements that will underpin the commercialisation of GM wheat.

In parallel to the global R&D program to deliver valued GM wheat varieties – including significant work in Australia – the grains industry’s supply chain-wide assessment process is underway.

A key step is the release at this week’s International Grains Forum in Perth, WA, of the document *‘GM wheat – a seven to ten year program of consultation and collaboration’*, prepared by Agrifood Awareness Australia Executive Director, Paula Fitzgerald.

“We have time on our side and are taking a long-term view as it is accepted fact that GM wheat is at least seven years away from commercialisation.

“The document outlines the series of actions that will occur in the years ahead and has been endorsed by a range a key Australian grains industry stakeholders.”

Keith Perrett, GRDC Chairman says the case for GM wheat R&D is compelling.

“It’s an accepted fact that the global human population is expected to reach 9 billion by 2050 and farmers will have to produce more food from finite land and water resources.

“Australian farmers will have a key role, as while we produce just 3% of the global wheat harvest each year, it accounts for near 15% of the global wheat trade.

“Importantly, wheat is the second largest food crop after corn, yet for the last decade or so, wheat plantings have declined. One reason for this is that wheat productivity and profitability growth lags behind corn, soybean, cotton and canola crops where modern plant science techniques have been utilised to significantly improve their performance.”

Dr Bruce Lee, Director, CSIRO Food Futures National Research Flagship says the use of modern gene technology in wheat breeding is an extension of historical variety adaptation and development.

“Bread wheat as we know it today is genetically complex and has been derived from a combination of primitive wheats.

“Under the guiding hand of farmers over the last 10,000 years, several different species of grasses mingled, cross-bred and hybridised to form a genetically diverse and flexible plant that we can continue to work with for our benefit.

“We can use modern GM technology to accelerate adaptive improvements, to help improve yields, sustain farming in marginal areas, overcome production adversities and improve the nutritional value of our food.

“In turn, all this can help to address food security and achieve healthier and more stable communities and populations.”

In acknowledgment of this scenario, Australia joined Canada and the United States of America to launch a GM Wheat Trilateral Statement in 2009. This statement:

- recognised the importance of GM wheat research and development, and
- noted that the three countries would work together to address market and trade considerations, prior to GM wheat being commercialised, to ensure that new crops are commercialised responsibly and provide choice for farmers, the broader agriculture industry, customers and importantly, consumers.

Accordingly, Ms Fitzgerald says over the years ahead, the Australian grains industry will work with domestic and international colleagues to examine and understand customer requirements for GM wheat, which will require regulatory approval in Australia and in export markets.

“Australia has successfully grown GM cotton since 1996 and GM canola since 2008. The Australian agriculture sector will utilise this experience and build on its capacity and expertise in science and global trade to ensure the successful introduction of GM wheat in a timely and responsible manner,” she says.

GM wheat – fast facts:

- GM wheat is at least seven years away from commercialisation.
- Approved field trials of some GM wheat varieties are now underway to assess the plants’ agronomic performance and characteristics.
- GM wheat will undergo stringent scientific assessment to ensure its safety for human health and the environment as part of the approval process by specialist regulatory authorities.
- The development of GM wheat varieties is a global collaborative effort involving scientists from both public and private sectors using proven technology.
- A recent survey in the USA showed strong support for GM wheat with almost three quarters of respondents indicating they would purchase products made with GM wheat, if the wheat was produced to use less water, land and/or pesticides.

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Editor’s notes:

- The “GM wheat – a seven year program of consultation and collaboration” brochure is available at: www.afa.com.au
- The Australian Government Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry and the Department of Agriculture and Food, Western Australia are co-hosting an International Grains Forum as part of the 32nd session of the International Grains Council in Perth, on 7-9 December 2010. The forum, to be held on 8 December, will address the theme ‘Grains supplies and global food security’. See: <http://agvivo.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2010/10/International-Grains-Forum-2010-brochure>.
- The GM Wheat Trilateral Statement, launched in May 2009, can be seen at: http://www.afa.com.au/news/news_pdf_057_FINAL_Trilateral_Biotech_Statement.pdf

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