



News Release

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Zero-tolerance for organic farming– a fallacy?

The notion of 'zero-tolerance' in agriculture has been labelled as a grave fallacy.

WA based scientist and long-serving grains industry member, Dr Ian Edwards, says the concept of zero-tolerance in a natural system is flawed logic, and mis-informs the community.

“To have a zero-tolerance attitude in agriculture is a fallacy. And, to promote zero-tolerance practises in agriculture creates unrealistic expectations along the supply chain and among consumers.”

Dr Edwards - currently Managing Director of Edstar Genetics Pty Ltd and Adjunct Professor in the School of Biological Sciences, University of Western Australia - is calling for an informed industry discussion on the concept of 'zero-tolerance'.

“But it is time to put the general use of this term to rest. Any scientist will tell you that absolute zero does not exist in biological systems, including agriculture.

“To maintain a notion that farming – of any type – can operate year-by-year in exclusion of everything around it is fanciful. I wonder if the organic sector has set an impossible task for its members?”

Dr Edwards says industry needs to appreciate why zero-tolerance cannot be guaranteed.

“A property boundary is just a line; it is not an impregnable shield that simultaneously excludes and contains plants, seeds, spores, animals, insects, micro-organisms, nutrients, chemical compounds and anything else that appears - either randomly or planned - on, under, over or around a farm.

“To believe that fences effectively mark boundaries between zero-tolerance and anything-else is to think that pigs will fly. Zero-tolerance is unworkable, unrealistic and defies biological reality.”

Dr Edwards suggests another reason to abolish the use of the term zero-tolerance in Australia is that it is out of step with the practises of organic organisations elsewhere in the world.

“While it might be news to some consumers, and those who purchase organic produce in particular, people should know that their food cannot - objectively - be purer than the driven snow.

“And while people have a right to have a subjective or ideological view of GM crops; industry is ill-advised to purport to be able to defy biological reality.

“Let’s all be frank. Organic farming is a production system process. It is not a certification of food content. Hence, the mere presence of a product of GM technology somewhere in that process will not affect the nature or description of an organic product.

“Simply, all farmers and their organisations need to consider and utilise science-based, agreed and realistic international best practice and standards for their members.”

The international grains industry has always operated on a system of standards and tolerances which recognize that random events occur and absolute purity cannot be 100% guaranteed. The Australia standard is the most rigid globally; it allows for an unintended presence level of up to 0.9% for grain.

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About Edstar Genetics and Dr Edwards:

Edstar Genetics Pty Ltd was formed in December 1998 and draws upon over 40 years of international experience by its principal, Dr Ian Edwards in providing professional consulting services in crop breeding. Dr Edwards spent 22 years with Pioneer Hi-Bred International where he was Worldwide Director of Field Crops. He continues to provide services to major ag-industry clients in cereal breeding and product development.

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