

Drought Imports

INTRODUCTION

Australia is experiencing a severe drought and crop production forecasts have been reduced significantly. The latest ABARE forecast states that current canola production is estimated to be 440,000 tonnes, 69 per cent lower than last year.

As a result of reduced production, import approvals have been sought to bring products into the country to meet local needs. The products coming in are from the American continent and are likely to be derived from gene technology. For some time, Australia has imported meal and oil to meet domestic demand.

PROCESS

All imports coming into Australia must adhere to Australian regulations, in particular, that of the Australian Quarantine and Inspection Service (AQIS). Where the product is viable and is likely to contain genetically modified (GM) content, AQIS will liaise with the Office of the Gene Technology Regulator (OGTR). The OGTR will assess and licence the product and may place certain licence conditions on it, over and above standard AQIS requirements for conventional imports, if there is an identified need to manage specific human health and safety and environmental issues.

For example, in January 2003, two licences were issued by the OGTR for the import of GM soybean and maize for processing for stockfeed and soy oil. In this case, the OGTR did not issue specific licence conditions but agreed that the standard AQIS import permit requirements to address plant, pest and disease quarantine concerns would also address any environmental issues. These requirements included:

- That the grain must be transported in covered trucks to processing plants in metropolitan areas,
- That the grain must be processed so that it is no longer viable, and
- That any spillage must be cleaned up and spilt grain destroyed.

THE CURRENT SITUATION

Recently, the OGTR has issued a licence for the import of Canadian canola seed which will be crushed in order to supply domestic oil and meal demands. The OGTR also issued another licence in 2003, which is still current, for the importation of soybeans for processing for oil and stockfeed.

Genetically modified canola and soy have been grown, traded and consumed globally for over a decade. As a result, the GM crops have regulatory approvals in numerous countries around the world.

AUSTRALIAN LABELLING LAWS

Australia has GM food labelling laws which allow consumers to make informed choices about the products they purchase. Products containing genetic material must be identified, in the ingredient panel, with the words "genetically modified" next to the relevant ingredient. **In the case of oil, there is no genetic material or DNA present in oil.** Therefore, oil from a GM plant is no different to oil from a non-GM plant, and as the oil does not contain any genetic material or DNA it is not required to be labelled under Australia's GM food labelling laws.

The same applies to products from animals fed GM animal feed. Numerous scientific studies have all concluded that meat, eggs and milk from animals fed approved GM feed, are no different to those fed non-GM feed and the feed cannot be detected in the end-products – meat, eggs and milk. Therefore, these products do not require labelling anywhere in the world.

KEY POINTS

- Australia is experiencing a severe drought and crop production is low. As a result Australia needs to import products to meet local requirements.
- Recent calls from the RSPCA for farmers to “put down malnourished stock” (see <http://abc.net.au/news/newsitems/200611/s1792805.htm>) highlight the importance of securing animal feed in these severe drought conditions.
- All imports must be approved by AQIS. Imports with GM content are assessed by the OGTR.
- The imported grain has been approved by FSANZ (Food Standards Australia New Zealand) for human consumption.
- GM canola, soy and corn have been grown commercially, consumed and traded around the world for ten years.

FURTHER INFORMATION AND READING

- Gene Technology Regulation - The Office of the Gene Technology Regulator - www.ogtr.gov.au
- Australia's GM food labelling regulations – Food Standards Australia New Zealand- www.foodstandards.gov.au (for a easy-to-read booklet explaining GM foods see: www.foodstandards.gov.au/srcfiles/GM%20Foods_text_pp_final.pdf)
- “Gene Technology and Animal Feed”, Agrifood Awareness Australia Limited factsheet - www.afa.com.au/pdf/5_Animal_feed.pdf

If you would like further background information about this briefing paper please contact Agrifood Awareness Australia Limited on (02) 6273 9535 or email info@afa.com.au

Agrifood Awareness Australia Limited is an industry initiative established to increase public awareness of, and encourage informed debate and decision-making about, gene technology. The organisation is supported by three peak bodies – CropLife Australia, the National Farmers' Federation, and the Grains Research and Development Corporation.

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