

Battleground

Genetic engineering versus organic

SCOTT KINNEAR reports on the current status of GE regulation, where this leaves organic farming and the future of food.

Controversy over genetic engineering (GE) continues with a recent announcement that Monsanto has been ordered to pay \$US1.5 million in fines for attempting to bribe an Indonesian government official.

Two years ago Monsanto paid the official \$50,000 in a bid to avoid environmental impact studies being conducted on its genetically engineered cotton. This must be of serious concern to the Gene Technology Regulator in assessing Monsanto's ongoing suitability to hold research and commercialisation licenses for GE in Australia.

In Australia, a review of the Gene Technology Act is due this year. This Act established the Gene Technology Regulator through a commonwealth and state legislative framework with the states giving the regulator the power to assess risk from GE and to issue licences for research and commercialisation of the crop. The regulator is not permitted to assess economic impact but the legislation allows the states to make such an assessment and to restrict releases of GE accordingly.

There are concerns that the GE industry may push for changes to the Act to limit the power of state governments in restricting the release of GE crops. Currently there are moratoriums against commercialisation of GE food crops in most states, except Queensland. We urge the various state governments to hold firm to the clauses in the Act that allow them to impose moratoriums against the release of GE crops.

WHAT'S AHEAD?

Where does all this leave organic farming in the near future? In 2004 small crop plantings for the purposes of seed increase and ongoing research were allowed in South Australia and Victoria for GE canola.

The issue for organic growers is that these sites have been kept secret in Victoria, and until November last year in South Australia. We ask that any future plantings under exemption orders be purely for research purposes (not for seed bulking) and that the state governments require the GE companies (in this case Bayer), to disclose information about location, size of planting, dates of planting, flowering and harvesting on a public register.

This will allow organic certifiers like Australian Certified Organic to assess the risk of contamination and to require appropriate testing. We also ask that the state governments require the GE companies to be responsible for the cost of testing imposed on organic growers and to be liable for any economic damages that may result if contamination is discovered in any organic crops. This type of legislation is being passed in Europe, notably in Germany and has been proposed for Britain.

The Biological Farmers of Australia will make available to

AT A GLANCE

- Gene Technology Act under review
- Public deserves more detail about research plantings of GE seed
- Farmers should join BFA in fight against modified canola
- High-profile campaign needed

farmers in this current year a number of form letters which can be used to send to GE companies and the State Government asking them to remove any GE canola plants that may be present.

The letters establish a legal precedent that will be very useful if contamination is found. The BFA has written to Bayer asking for them to take responsibility for the costs of testing by

our growers and asking for notification of planting sites.

To date Bayer has refused to comply with our requests. Given that the sites are limited in Victoria and SA to about 60 hectares in each state, we do not anticipate that the costs of testing will be huge for a company the size of Bayer.

For our farmers to bear the cost will be a large impost if they happen to be within pollination distance of a GE canola crop site. I would urge all organic growers to continue to be involved in this vital food debate at a local and regional level over the coming years.

THE FUTURE OF FOOD

This battle over GE is about the future of food. Will it be GE or organic? Letting your local community know why you are ►



Paul Wilkes of Ingoldsby Organics, Lockyer Valley, Qld, is an ACO-certified potato grower.

growing organically and the benefits and opportunities that flow from these practices will be critical in creating public debate.

The more coverage we get, the better. The BFA will continue to lobby for better resources and treatment by government, but we need your help on the ground.

Last year I had the opportunity to spend time with British MP Michael Meacher, when he visited Australia. He was until a couple of years ago the environment minister in Britain.

During his term as minister he oversaw the farm-scale evaluation trials of GE crops in Britain that looked at environment impact. He said the research was designed to give the green light to GE. They planned trials to ask questions they already knew the answer to. The scope was narrow and the GE companies were invited to help design the trials. In his words, Mr Meacher said he was gob-smacked when some of the results came back showing that the GE crops were worse for the environment than their conventional counterparts.

As a result of the research the British Government continued its moratorium against the planting of canola and sugar beet in Britain. Mr Meacher then began reading about both sides of the debate and became convinced that GE was risky and that organic farming was the future of food production.

I also spent time with British scientist Mae-Wan Ho, who is also opposed to GE crops. She put together a manifesto for an organic Europe that was presented to the European Parliament

Letting your local community know why you are growing organically and the benefits and opportunities that flow from these practices will be critical in creating public debate.

with support from hundreds of scientists and politicians.

One crucial piece of evidence in favour of organic production is emerging. We can feed the world organically and if we do not change course sooner rather than later we are likely to witness severe degradation of food production systems under chemical management that may cause shortages and take decades longer to repair than if we alter course now.


Currently, the world produces much more food than it needs and famines occur due to the inability to distribute food because of political and economic constraints.

Mae-Wan Ho, while in Australia, presented the results of organic farming research in Ethiopia, a country synonymous with famine. The research into simple composting techniques coupled with organic farming showed dramatically increased yields in every soil type and climate type across the country.



Developing countries are wise to continue to resist the introduction of GE crops, which could contaminate and affect future export opportunities while encouraging dependence on GE corporations for seed and related technologies.

I am convinced that our collective food futures lie with biological organic farming and social systems that instead of food output being mass produced, processed and transported, is tailored to the environmental and social needs of local communities first and foremost.

Scott Kinnear is the BFA spokesperson for GE and an appointed director on the BFA board.



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