DEPARTMENT OF
PRIMARY INDUSTRIES

Submission Cover Sheet

Review of the Moratorium on GM Canola

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Submission - Review of the Moratorium on GM Canola (August 2007)

This is a personal submission and does not necessarily reflect the view of any organisation. It is informed by extensive reading around the issue of GM technology, by my experience working with farmers (Southern Farming Systems, Landcare, Environmental Best Management Practices Project), and by conversations with many people living and working in our rural community of Lake Bolac, the centre of a major canola growing region. It is also clear from discussions with growers, that many farmers and their families do not agree with the VFF position, which supports the lifting of the moratorium.

The terms of the review are limited to trade issues and the economic impacts of lifting the moratorium on the commercial planting of GM canola. The OGTR has determined that neither Monsanto's nor Bayer's herbicide tolerant canola varieties pose any threat to health or the environment. It would seem that many well-credentialed experts would disagree with this determination and there is concern that there are very real potential for both health and environmental problems. These areas of uncertainty about possible risks, underlie the concerns of both farmers and consumers. This uncertainty will indeed affect trade. Trade is based on trust between consumers and suppliers. Consumers want assurance that the food products they buy are safe and not detrimental to health. Increasingly, consumers world wide are also concerned about environmental issues and are looking for products which meet a "clean and green" criteria. These consumers are unlikely to accept GM foods.

Farmers in Australia now have access to most of the world's markets for canola, cereals, pulses, dairy products and other commodities. We have the advantage of physical isolation and so have enormous potential to trade as a "clean, green" producer of high quality food, with the potential for price premiums. This advantage will be lost if GM canola is grown on a commercial scale in Australia.

Although canola oil is the main form in which canola is consumed by humans, and only minimal amounts of GM protein will find their way into cooking oil and margarine, canola meal is fed to domestic animals eg dairy cows, hens and pigs, and thus the GM proteins will enter the food chain in this way. This has the potential to impact on consumer confidence in products such as dairy foods, eggs and meat.

Segregation of GM and non-GM canola will generally not be practicable, so once GM canola is grown commercially the bulk of Australia's canola crop will be deemed to be GM for trade purposes. As well, canola seed will contaminate other cereals and pulses. It is not practicable to completely clean tiny canola seeds out of such places as headers, trucks, bulk bins and silos. This will mean that all cereals and pulses will be exposed to contamination by GM canola and so markets requiring GM free produce will potentially be lost to Australia.

Experience in Canada has shown that many of the world's markets are now closed to Canadian canola growers. They face high input costs operating in a seed and chemical market monopolised by a small number of international corporations whose main concern is generating a profit for their share holders. This is also the case in the USA where farmers are heavily subsidized to keep them afloat.

The introduction of commercially grown GM canola will impact on the right to trade of conventional and organic growers. Farmers wanting to grow conventional varieties will struggle with contamination issues and organic farmers will potentially lose their organic status because of contamination. Markets for other products will be indirectly affected eg. honey, where GM pollen will be a contaminant. The introduction of GM crops will severely compromise the emerging trend for many broad acre growers to change to biological farming methods in an attempt to farm in a more sustainable way for the long term. There is currently a huge increase in demand for organic produce. If GM canola is introduced, growers producing GM free foods will face increased costs for segregation, testing and labelling.

Growers may see a short-term agronomic benefit from GM canola, enabling them initially to eliminate troublesome weeds, but they will soon face issues with increased numbers of herbicide resistant weeds, and herbicide resistant volunteers in future crops, necessitating the use of stronger chemicals for control, and thus increasing costs.

There is too much uncertainty with GM canola to risk introducing it on a commercial basis for a small potential short-term economic gain, where most of this gain will be to the international corporations selling the technology.

I urge the review panel to recommend retaining the moratorium on the commercial planting of GM canola.

Una Allender